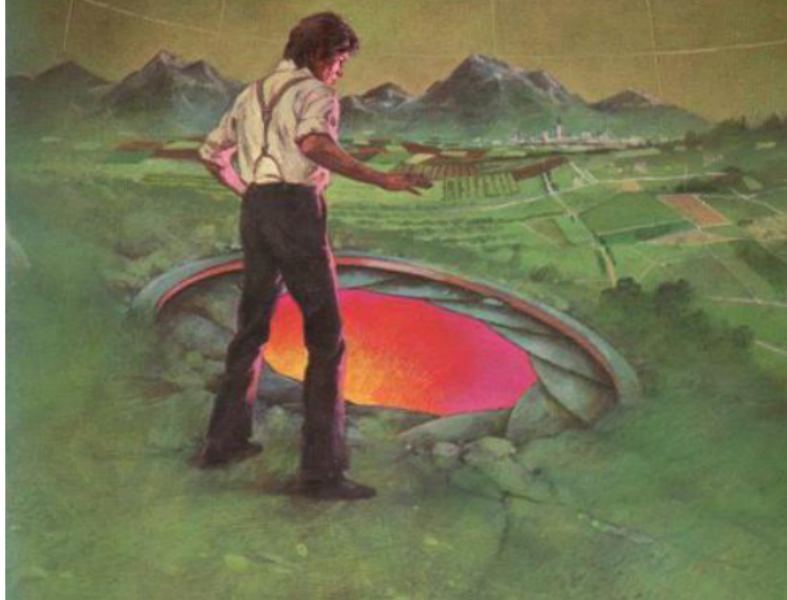


A NOVEL OF THE STARLOST

He had been banished from his own land.
Now he was alone in a frightening new world.

**PHOENIX
WITHOUT
ASHES** BY
**EDWARD BRYANT &
HARLAN ELLISON**



TO THE STARS—TO DIE!

Harlan Ellison created a bold concept for a television series. Winner of more sf awards than any living author, Ellison soon realized his “enclosed universe” concept was being ripped-off by inept TV producers.

But his original teleplay for the series won a Writers Guild award as the Most Outstanding Teleplay of the year. Now Harlan Ellison and Edward Bryant (Nebula award winning author) have joined forces to bring *The Starlost* to reality as it was intended.

In *Phoenix Without Ashes*, based on Ellison’s award-winning teleplay, Edward Bryant has created a story filled with wonder and adventure.

PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES

by
HARLAN ELLISON AND EDWARD BRYANT

Published by [ReAnimus Press](http://ReAnimus.com)

Other Books by Edward Bryant:
(All Coming soon from ReAnimus Press)

Among the Dead and Other Events Leading to the Apocalypse
Cinnabar
Wyoming Sun
Particle Theory
Neon Twilight
Darker Passions
Flirting With Death
The Baku: Tales of the Nuclear Age

© 2012, 1975 by Edward W. Bryant Jr. and Harlan Ellison. All rights reserved.

<http://ReAnimus.com/authors/harlanellisonandedwardbryant>

A NOVEL OF *THE STARLOST* #1

PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES

By Edward Bryant & Harlan Ellison

Adapted from the Award-Winning Script by Harlan Ellison

Licence Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase

your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
DEDICATION
INTRODUCTION
THE STARLOST: UPDATE
PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES
PROLOGUE
ONE
TWO
THREE
FOUR
FIVE
SIX
SEVEN
EIGHT
NINE
TEN
ELEVEN
TWELVE
THIRTEEN
FOURTEEN
FIFTEEN
SIXTEEN
SEVENTEEN
EIGHTEEN
NINETEEN
TWENTY
TWENTY-ONE
TWENTY-TWO
TWENTY-THREE
TWENTY-FOUR
TWENTY-FIVE
TWENTY-SIX
TWENTY-SEVEN
TWENTY-EIGHT
TWENTY-NINE
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to pay their respects to the long and honorable line of dreamers who have employed the “enclosed universe” theme as the basis for works of fantasy. Without their visions, this book would not have been, unless we’d predated their visions, in which case someone else would have written this book and they’d be paying homage to *us* as classic dreamers... but that’s another story. Thanks to Homer for his ship of Odysseus; Jonah and his whale; Melville and Ahab for *their* whale and the Pequod; Mark Twain for Huck and Jim’s raft; James Joyce for Leopold Bloom and his mind; Dante, Verne, Wells, Cyrano, Lucian and, earliest in sf—as best we can trace it—Don Wilcox; to Robert Heinlein for “Universe” and “Common Sense”; to Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, Edmund Cooper, Harry Harrison, J. T. McIntosh, Alexei Panshin, Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth, E. C. Tubb, William F. Temple, Poul Anderson, James Blish, Clifford Simak, and Kate Wilhelm. And to Katherine Anne Porter. If we’ve overlooked anyone, we’re bound to hear about it.

E.B. / H.E.

DEDICATION

Phase One:

This one is, of course, for HARLAN ELLISON, as well as other victims of radiation virus, space senility, and the committee system.

E.B.

Phase Two:

That's nonsense. His name doesn't appear first on the byline because I'm awash with charity. I had the original dream, yeah, but this would be a script, not a novel, if it hadn't been for his talent and patience and hard work and, most of all, his deadpan friendship. So this one, clearly, is for that Solar Star, ED BRYANT.

H.E.

Life is not a spectacle or a feast;
it is a predicament.

—GEORGE SANTAYANA
Articles and Essays

INTRODUCTION

SOMEHOW, I DON'T THINK WE'RE IN KANSAS, TOTO

by Harlan Ellison

Six months of my life were spent in creating a dream the shape and sound and color of which had never been seen on television. The dream was called *The Starlost*, and between February and September of 1973 I watched it being steadily turned into a nightmare.

The late Charles Beaumont, a scenarist of unusual talents, who wrote many of the most memorable *Twilight Zones*, said to me when I arrived in Hollywood in 1962, "Attaining success in Hollywood is like climbing a gigantic mountain of cow flop, in order to pluck one perfect rose from the summit. And you find when you've made that hideous climb... you've lost the sense of smell."

In the hands of the inept, the untalented, the venal, and the corrupt, *The Starlost* became a veritable Mt. Everest of cow flop, and, though I climbed that mountain, somehow I never lost sight of the dream, never lost the sense of smell, and when it got so rank I could stand it no longer, I descended hand-over-hand from the northern massif, leaving behind \$93,000, the corrupters, and the eviscerated remains of my dream. I'll tell you about it.

February. Marty the agent called and said, "Go over to 20th and see Robert Kline."

"Who's Robert Kline?"

"West Coast head of taped syndicated shows. He's putting together a package of mini-series, eight or ten segments per show. He wants to do a science fiction thing. He asked for you. It'll be a co-op deal between 20th Century-Fox and the BBC. They'll shoot it in London."

London! "I'm on my way," I said, the jet-wash of my departure deafening him across the phone connection.

I met Kline in the New Administration Building of 20th, and his first words were so filled with sugar I had the feeling if I listened to him for very long I'd wind up with diabetes: "I wanted the top sf writer in the world," he said. Then he ran through an informed list of my honors in the field of science fiction. Let Asimov chew on *that* for a while, I thought, blushing prettily.

Then Kline advised me that what he was after was "a sort of *The Fugitive* in space." Visions of doing a novel-for-television in the mode

of *The Prisoner* splatted like overripe casaba melons; I got up and started to walk.

“Hold it, hold it!” Kline said. “What did *you* have in mind?” I sat down again.

Then I ran through half a dozen ideas for series that would be considered primitive ideas in the literary world of sf. Kline found each of them too complex. As a final toss at the assignment, I said, “Well, I’ve been toying with an idea for tape, rather than film; it could be done with enormous production values that would be financially impossible for a standard filmed series.”

“What is it?” he said.

And here’s what I said:

Three hundred years from now, the Earth is about to suffer a cataclysm that will destroy all possibility for life on the planet. Time is short. The greatest minds and the noblest philanthropists get together and cause to have constructed in orbit between the Moon and the Earth a giant ark, one thousand miles long, comprised of hundreds of self-contained biospheres. Into each of these little worlds is placed a segment of Earth’s population, its culture intact. Then the ark is sent off toward the stars—even as the Earth is destroyed—to seed the new worlds surrounding those stars with the remnants of humanity.

But one hundred years after the flight has begun, a mysterious “accident” (which would remain a mystery till the final segment of the show, hopefully four years later) kills the entire crew, seals the biosphere-worlds so they have no contact with one another... and the long voyage goes on with the people trapped, developing their societies without any outside influence. Five hundred years go by, and the travelers—the Starlost—forget the Earth. To them it is a myth, a vague legend, even as Atlantis is to us. They even forget they are adrift in space, forget they are in an interstellar vessel. Each community thinks it is “the world” and that the world is only fifty square miles, with a metal ceiling.

Until Devon, an outcast in a society rigidly patterned after the Amish communities of times past, discovers the secret, that they are onboard a space-going vessel. He learns the history of the Earth, learns of its destruction, and learns that when “the accident” happened, the astrogation gear of the ark was damaged and now the last seed of humankind is on a collision course with a star. Unless he can convince a sufficient number of biosphere worlds to band together in a communal attempt to learn how the ark works, to repair it and reprogram their flight, they will soon be incinerated in the furnace of that star toward which they’re heading.

It was, in short, a fable of our world today.

“Fresh! Original! New!” Kline chirruped. “There’s never been an

idea like it before!" I didn't have the heart to tell him the idea was first propounded in astronomical literature in the early 1920's by the great Russian pioneer Tsiolkovsky, nor that the British physicist Bernal had done a book on the subject in 1929, nor that the idea had become *very* common coin in the genre of science fiction through stories by Heinlein, Harrison, Aldiss, Panshin, Simak, and many others. (Arthur C. Clarke's Hugo and Nebula award-winning bestseller, *Rendezvous With Rama*, is the latest example of the basic idea.)

Kline suggested I dash home and write up the idea, which he would then merchandise. I pointed out to him that the Writers Guild frowns on speculative writing and that if he wanted the riches of my invention, he should lay on me what we call "holding money" to enable me to write a prospectus and to enable him to blue-sky it with the BBC.

The blood drained from his face at my suggestion of advance money, and he said he had to clear it with the BBC, but that if I wrote the prospectus he would guarantee me a free trip to London. I got up and started to walk.

"Hold it, hold it!" he said, and opened a desk drawer. He pulled out a cassette recorder and extended it. "Tell you what: why don't you just tell it on a cassette, the same way you told it to me." I stopped and looked. This was a new one on me. In almost thirteen years as a film and television writer, I'd seen some of the most circuitous Machiavellian dodges ever conceived by the mind of Western Man to get writers to write on the cuff. But never this.

I thought on it for a moment, rationalized that this wasn't speculative writing, that at worst it was "speculative talking," and since a writer is expected to pitch an idea verbally anyhow, it was just barely legitimate.

So I took the cassette home, backed my spiel with the music from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, outlined the barest bones of the series concept, and brought it back to Kline.

"Okay. Here it is," I said, "but you can't transcribe it. If you do, then it becomes spec writing and you have to pay me." I was assured he wouldn't put it on paper, and that he'd get back to me shortly. He was sure the BBC would go bananas for the idea.

No sooner was I out of his office than he had his secretary transcribe the seven-minute tape.

March. No word.

April. No word.

May. Suddenly there was a flurry of activity. Marty the agent called. "Kline sold the series. Go see him."

"Series?" I said, appalled. "But that idea was only viable for eight segments.... A *series*, you say?"

“Go see him.”

So I went. Kline greeted me as if I were the only human capable of deciphering the Mayan Codex, and caroled that he had sold the series not only to forty-eight of the NBC independent affiliates, but that the Westinghouse outlets had bitten, and so had the entire Canadian television network CTV.

“Uh, excuse me,” I said, in an act of temerity not usually attributed to writers in Hollywood, “how did you manage to sell this, er, *series* without having a contract with me, or a prospectus, or a pilot script, or a pilot film... or anything?”

“They read your outline, and they bought it on the strength of your name.”

“They *read* it? How?”

He circumnavigated that little transgression of his promise not to set my words on paper, and began talking in grandiose terms about how I’d be the story editor, how I’d have creative control, how I’d write many scripts for the show, and what a good time I’d have in Toronto.

“Toronto?!” I said, gawking. “What the hell happened to London? The Sir Lew Grade Studios. Soho. Buckingham Palace. Swinging London. What happened to all that?”

Mr. Kline, without bothering to inform the creator of this hot property he had been successfully hawking, had been turned down by the BBC and had managed to lay off the project with CTV, as an all-Canadian production of Glen Warren, a Toronto-based operation that was already undertaking to tape *The Starlost* at the CFTO studios in Toronto. It was assumed by Mr. Kline that I would move to Toronto to story edit the series; he never bothered to ask if I *wanted* to move to Canada, he just assumed I would.

Mr Kline was a real bear for assuming things.

Such as: I would write *his* series (which was the way he now referred to it) even though a writers’ strike was imminent. I advised him that if the strike hit, I would be incommunicado, but he waved away my warnings with the words, “Everything will work out.” With such words, Napoleon went to Leipzig.

At that time I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Writers Guild of America, West. I was very pro-union, pro-strike, pro-getting long overdue contract inequities with the producers straightened out.

Just before the strike began, Kline called and said he was taking out advertisements for the series. He said he’d had artwork done for the presentations, and he needed some copy to accompany the drawings. I asked him how he could have artwork done when the spaceship had not yet been designed? (I was planning to create a vessel that would be absolutely feasible and scientifically correct, in conjunction with Ben Bova, editor of *Analog*, the leading sf magazine in the country.)

Kline said there wasn't time for all that fooling-around; ads had to go out *now*!

It has always been one of the imponderables of the television industry to me, how the time is always *now*, when three days earlier no one had even *heard* of the idea.

But I gave him some words and, to my horror, saw the ad a week later: it showed a huge bullet-shaped *thing* I guess Kline thought was a spaceship, being smacked by a meteorite, a great hole being torn in the skin of the bullet, revealing many levels of living space within... all of them drawn the wrong direction. I covered my eyes.

Let me pause for a moment to explain why this was a scientifically illiterate, wholly incorrect piece of art, because it was merely the first indication of how little the producers of *The Starlost* understood what they were doing. Herewith, a Child's Primer of Science Fiction:

There is no air in space. Space is very nearly a vacuum. That means an interstellar vessel, since it won't be landing anywhere, and doesn't need to be designed for passage through atmosphere, can be designed any way that follows the function best. The last time anyone used the bullet design for a starship was in *The Green Slime* (a film that oozes across the "Late Late Late Show" at times when normal people are sleeping).

But it indicated the lack of understanding of sf by television executives. Look: if you turn on your set and see a pair of white swinging doors suddenly slammed open by a gurney pushed by two white-smocked attendants, you know that within moments Marcus Welby will be jamming a tube down somebody's trachea; if you see a dude in a black Stetson lying-out on a butte, aiming a Winchester, you know that within moments the Wells Fargo stage is gonna be thundering down that dusty trail; if Mannix walks into his inner office and there's a silky lady lounging in the chair across from his desk, you know that by the end of act one someone is going to try ventilating Joe's hide. It's all by rote, all programmed, all predictable... which is why sf seems to be having such a resurgence: it *isn't* predictable. Or at least it shouldn't be. A science fiction story has to have an interior logic, it has to be consistent, to get the viewer to go along with it. Rigorous standards of plotting *must* be employed to win that willing suspension of disbelief on the part of viewers that will get them to accept the fantastic premise. Break that logic, dumb it up, and the whole thing falls apart like Watergate testimony.

But the ad was only an early storm warning of what troubles were yet to befall me. The strike was called, and then began weeks of a kind of ghastly harassment I'd always thought was reserved for overblown melodramas about the Evils of Hollywood. Phone calls at all hours, demanding I write the "bible" for the series. (A "bible" is industry

shorthand for the *precis* of what the show will do, who the characters are, what directions storylines should take. In short, the blueprint from which individual segments are written. Without a bible, only the creator knows what the series is about. Kline had no bible. He had nothing, at this point, but that seven-minute tape. With which item, plus my name and the name of the executive producer, Doug Trumbull—who had done the special effects for *2001* and had directed *Silent Running*—he had sold this pipe dream to everyone in the Western World.)

But I wouldn't write the bible. I was on strike. Then began the threats. Followed by the intimidation, the bribes, the promises that they'd go forward with the idea without me, the veiled hints of scab writers who'd be hired to write their own version of the series... everything short of actually kidnapping me. Through these weeks—when even flights out of Los Angeles to secluded hideaways in the Michigan wilds and the northern California peninsula failed to deter the phone calls—I refused to write. It didn't matter that the series might not get on the air, it didn't matter that I'd lose a potload of money. The Guild was on strike in a noble cause, and, besides, I didn't much trust Mr. Kline and the anonymous voices that spoke to me in the wee hours of the night. And, contrary to popular belief, though *TV Guide* takes every opportunity to pass the lie off as utter truth, many television writers are men and women of ethic: they can be rented, but they can't be bought.

At one point, representatives of Mr. Kline *did* bring in a scab. A nonunion writer to whom they had told a series of outright lies so he'd believe he was saving my bacon. When they approached well-known sf author Robert Silverberg to write the bible, Bob asked them point-blank, "Why isn't Harlan writing it?" They fum-fuhed and said, well, er, uh, he's on strike. Bob said, "Would he want me to write this?" They knew he'd call me, and they told him no, I'd be angry. So he passed up some thousands of dollars, and they went elsewhere.

I found out about the end-run, located the writer in a West L.A. hotel where they'd secreted him, writing madly through a weekend, and I convinced him he shouldn't turn in the scab bible. To put the period to the final argument that Kline & Co. were not being honest, I called Kline from that hotel room while the other writer listened in on the bathroom extension phone. I asked Kline point-blank if other writers had been brought in to scab. He said no; he assured me they were helplessly waiting out the strike till I could bring the purity of my original vision to the project. I thanked him, hung up, and looked at the other writer who had just spent seventy-two hours beating his brains out writing a scab bible. "I rest my case."

"Let's go to the Writers Guild," he said.

It drove Kline bananas. Everywhichway he turned, I was there, confounding his shabby attempts at circumventing an honest strike.

I'll skip a little now. The details were ugly, but grow tedious in the retelling. It went on at hideous length, for weeks. Finally, Glen Warren in Toronto, at Kline's urging, managed to get the Canadian writers guild, ACTRA, to accept that *The Starlost* was a wholly Canadian-produced series. They agreed that was the case, after much pressure was applied in ways I'm not legally permitted to explicate, and I was finally convinced I should go to work.

That was my next mistake.

They had been circulating copies of the scab bible with all of its erroneous material, and had even given names to the characters. When I finally produced the authentic bible, for which they'd been slaving so long, it confused everyone. They'd already begun building sets and fashioning materiel that had nothing to do with the show.

I was brought up to Toronto, to work with writers, and because the producing entity would get government subsidies if the show was clearly acceptable in terms of "Canadian content" (meaning the vast majority of writers, actors, directors, and production staff had to be Canadian), I was ordered to assign script duties to Canadian TV writers.

I sat in the Four Seasons Motel in Toronto in company with a man named Bill Davidson, who had been hired as the producer, even though he knew nothing about science fiction and seemed thoroughly confused by the bible, and interviewed dozens of writers from 9 A.M. till 7 P.M.

It is my feeling that one of the prime reasons for the artistic (and, it would seem, ratings) failure of *The Starlost* was the quality of the scripts. But it isn't as simple a matter as saying the Canadians aren't good writers, which is the cop-out Glen Warren and Kline use. Quite the opposite is true. The Canadian writers I met were bright, talented, and anxious as hell to write good shows.

Unfortunately, because of the nature of Canadian TV, which is vastly different from American TV, they had virtually no experience writing episodic drama as we know it. ("Train them," Kline told me. "Train a cadre of writers?" I said, stunned. "Sure," said Kline, who knew nothing about writing, "it isn't hard." No, not if I wanted to make it my life's work.) And, for some peculiar reason, with only two exceptions I can think of, there are *no* Canadian sf writers.

But they were willing to work their hearts out to do good scripts. Sadly, they didn't have the kind of freaky minds it takes to plot a sf story with originality and logic. There were the usual number of talking plant stories, giant ant stories, space pirate stories, westerns transplanted to alien environments, the Adam-&-Eve story, the after-

the-Bomb story... the usual cliches people who haven't been trained to think in fantasy terms conceive of as fresh and new.

Somehow, between Ben Bova, and myself—Ben having been hired after I made it abundantly clear that I needed a specialist to work out the science properly—we came up with ten script ideas, and assigned them. We knew there would be massive rewrite problems, but I was willing to work with the writers, because they were energetic and anxious to learn. Unfortunately, such was not the case with Davidson and the moneymen from 20th, NBC, Glen Warren, and the CTV, who were revamping and altering arrangements daily, in a sensational imitation of The Mad Caucus-Race from *Alice in Wonderland*.

I told the Powers-In-Charge that I would need a good assistant story editor who could do rewrites, because I was not about to spend the rest of my natural life in a motel in Toronto, rewriting other people's words. They began to scream. One gentleman came up to the room and banged his fist on the desk while I was packing to split, having received word a few hours earlier that my mother was dying in Florida. He *told* me I was going to stay there in that room till the first drafts of the ten scripts came in. He *told* me that I was going to write the pilot script in that room and not leave till it was finished. He *told* me I could go home but would be back on such-and-such a date. He *told* me that was my schedule.

I *told* him if he didn't get the hell out of my room I was going to clean his clock for him.

Then he went away, still screaming; Ben Bova returned to New York; I went to see my mother, established that she was somehow going to pull through, returned to Los Angeles, and sat down to finish writing the pilot script.

This was June already. Or was it July. Things blur.

In any case, it was only weeks away from airdate debut, and they didn't even have all the principals cast. Not to mention the special effects Trumbull had promised, which weren't working out; the production staff under the confused direction of Davidson was doing a dandy impression of a Balinese Fire & Boat Drill; Kline, who was still madly dashing about selling something that didn't exist to people who apparently didn't care what they were buying... and I was banging my brains out writing "Phoenix Without Ashes," the opening segment that was to limn the direction of the single most expensive production ever attempted in Canada.

I was also brought up on charges by the Writers Guild for writing during the strike.

I called Marty the agent and threatened him with disembowelment if he ever again called me to say, "Go see Bob Kline." In my personal lexicon, the word "kline" could be found along with "eichmann," "dog

catcher,” and “rerun.”

But I kept writing. I finished the script and got it off to Canada with only one interruption of note:

The name Norman Klenman had been tossed at me frequently in Toronto by the CTV representative and Davidson and, of course, by Kline and his minions. Klenman, I was told, was the answer to my script problems. He was a Canadian writer who had fled to the States for the larger money, and since he was actually a Canadian citizen who was familiar with writing American series TV, he would be acceptable to the TV board in Ottawa under the terms of “Canadian content” and yet would be a top-notch potential for scripts that didn’t need heavy rewriting. I was too dazed in Toronto to think about Klenman.

But as I sat there in Los Angeles writing my script, I received a call from Mr. Klenman, who was at that moment in Vancouver. “Mr. Ellison,” he said, politely enough, “this is Norman Klenman. Bill Davidson wanted me to call you about *The Starlost*. I’ve read your bible and, frankly, I find it very difficult and confusing—I don’t understand science fiction—but if you want to train me, and pay me the top-of-the-show money the Guild just struck for, I’ll be glad to take a crack at a script for you.” I thanked him and said I’d get back to him when I’d saved my protagonist from peril at the end of act four.

When I walked off the show, guess who they hired not only as story editor, to replace me, but to rewrite my script, as well. If you guessed Golda Meir, you lose. It was Norman Klenman who “don’t understand science fiction.”

My walkout on my brain child, and all that pretty fame and prettier money was well in the wind by the time of Klenman’s call, but I was still intending to write the scripts I’d contracted for, when the following incidents happened, and I knew it was all destined for the ashcan.

I was in Dallas. Guest of honor at a convention where I was trying to summon up the gall to say *The Starlost* would be a dynamite series. I was paged in the lobby. Phone call from Toronto. It was Bill Davidson. The conversation describes, better than ten thousand more words by me, what was wrong with the series:

“Major problems, Harlan,” Davidson said. Panic lived in his voice.

“Okay, tell me what’s the matter,” I said.

“We can’t shoot a fifty-mile-in-diameter biosphere on the ship.”

“Why?”

“Because it looks all fuzzy on the horizon.”

“Look out the window, Bill. Everything is fuzzy on the horizon.”

“Yeah, but on TV it all gets muddy in the background. We’re going to have to make it a six-mile biosphere.”

“Whaaaat?!”

“Six miles is the best we can do.”

There is a pivotal element in the pilot script where the hero manages to hide out from a lynch mob. In a fifty-mile biosphere that was possible. In a six-mile biosphere all they’d have to do is link arms and walk across it. “But, Bill, that means I’ll have to rewrite the entire script.”

“Well, that’s the best we can do.”

Then, in a blinding moment of *satori*, I realized, Davidson was wrong, dead wrong. His thinking was so limited he was willing to scrap the logic of the script rather than think it through. “Bill,” I said, “who can tell the difference on a TV screen, whether the horizon is six miles away or fifty? And since we’re showing them an enclosed world that’s never existed before, why *shouldn’t* it look like that! Shoot *de facto* six miles and call it fifty; it doesn’t make any damned difference!”

There was a pause, then, “I never thought of that.”

Only one indication of the unimaginative, hidebound, and obstinately arrogant thinking that emerged from total unfamiliarity with the subject, proceeded through mistake after mistake, and foundered on the rocks of inability to admit confusion.

The conversation went on with Davidson telling me that even if Trumbull’s effects didn’t work and they couldn’t shoot a fifty-mile biosphere—after he’d just admitted that it didn’t matter *what* distance they said they were showing—I’d simply *love* the set they were building of the control room.

“You’re building the *control* room?” I said, aghast with confusion and disbelief. “But you won’t need that till the last segment of the series. Why are you building it now?”

(It should be noted that one of the Maltese Falcons of the series, one of the prime mysteries, is the location of the control room biosphere. When they find it, they can put the ark back on course. If they find it in the first segment, it automatically becomes the shortest TV series in history.)

“Because you had it in your bible,” he explained.

“That was intended to show how the series ended, for God’s sake!” I admit I was screaming at that point. “If they find it first time out, we can all pack our bags and show an hour of recorded organ music!”

“No, no,” Davidson argued, “they still have to find the backup controls, don’t they?”

“Aaaaarghh,” I aaaargghed. “Do you have even the faintest scintilla of an idea what a backup control *is*?”

“Uh, no. What is it?”

“It’s a fail-safe system, you drooling imbecile; it’s what they use if

the primary fails. The primary is the control... oh, to hell with it!" I hung up.

When I returned to Los Angeles, I found matters had degenerated even further. They were shooting a six-mile biosphere and *calling* it six miles. They said no one would notice the discrepancy in the plot. They were building the control room, with that arrogant ignorance that could not be argued with. Ben Bova, who was the technical adviser, had warned them they were going about it in the wrong way. They nodded their heads... and ignored him.

Then Klenman rewrote me. Oh boy.

As an indication of the level of mediocrity they were seeking, "Phoenix Without Ashes" had been retitled, in one of the great artistic strokes of all time, "Voyage of Discovery." I sent them word they would have to take my name off the show as creator and as writer of that segment. But they would have to use my pseudonym, to protect my royalties and residuals. (They had gang-banged my creation, but I'd be damned if I'd let them profit any further from the rape.)

Davidson reluctantly agreed. He knew the Writers Guild contract guaranteed me that one last weapon. "What's your pen name? We'll use it. What is it?"

"Cordwainer Bird," I said. "That's b-i-r-d, as in 'for the birds.'"

Now *he* was screaming. He swore they'd fight me, they'd never use it, I was denying them the use of my name that was so valuable with science fiction fans. Never! Never!

God bless the Writers Guild.

If you'd tuned in the show before it vanished from all earthly ken—and ratings guaranteed that hoped-for day was not long in coming—you would have seen a solo credit card that said:

CREATED BY CORDWAINER BIRD

and that was your humble servant saying the Visigoths had won again.

Bova walked off the series the week after Trumbull left. Scientific illiteracies he'd warned them against, such as "radiation virus" (which is an impossibility: radiation is a matter of atoms, viruses are biological entities, even as you and I and Kline and Davidson, I presume), "space senility" (which, I guess, means old, feeble, blathering vacuum), and "solar star" (which is a terrific illiterate redundancy like saying, "I live in a big house home").

The Starlost has come up a loser. Once again, because they don't understand the materials with which they have to work, because they are so tunnel-visioned into thinking every dramatic series can be transliterated from the prosaic and overfamiliar materials of cop,

doctor, and cowboy shows, because there was so much money to be skimmed... another attempt at putting sf on the little screen with intelligence has come up a loser.

Have you learned anything? Probably not. Viewers seem not to care about authenticity, accuracy, logic, literacy, inventiveness. Friends call me when they see *The Starlost* (which still has some small syndication life in outlying areas), and they tell me how much they like it. I snarl and hang up on them.

But even though I fell down that rabbit-hole in TV Land and found I was not in Kansas, or any other place that resembled the real world, I had one moment of bright and lovely retribution.

The roof started to fall in on them, just as I'd said it would if they didn't come up with decent scripts and a production head who knew what he was doing, and they called Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, and they offered him fifty percent of the show if he'd come up and produce the show out of trouble for them. Gene laughed at them and said what did he need fifty percent of a loser for, he had one hundred percent of two winners of his own. They said they could understand that, but did he have someone else in mind whom he could recommend as producer? Gene said, sure he did.

They made the mistake of asking him who.

He said, "Harlan Ellison. If you hadn't screwed him so badly, he could have done a good job for you."

Then *he* hung up on *them*.

Which is just what viewers did.

As I'd warned them, NBC received such lousy reviews of the show, they did not pick up the option for an additional eight segments. There were only sixteen episodes of *The Starlost*. I could not watch them. With the exception of watching the abomination created from my script. "Phoenix Without Ashes," I never saw one of the shows.

Perhaps you were equally as fortunate.

And the only good thing that has come from my association with *The Starlost* is now in your hands. This book, what I take to be a masterful adaptation of my original pilot script for the series, is considerably more than the typical "script-into-potboiler novel." It is solely and wholly the work of an exciting young sf writer named Ed Bryant. If you aren't familiar with his special talent, this is a good introduction, and should compel you to look up his two books of short stories. Ed took the script and expanded it in every possible way. It is deeper, richer, more exciting than any ten segments of *any* TV show.

Had I been permitted to creatively steer the show in intelligent and entertaining directions, I would have asked Ed to write some scripts for me. Had I written a book based on my script myself, I would have wanted it to be as good as this one. But in a happy, crazy turn of

events, Ed has done the novel himself, and I'm pleased as hell it *wasn't* me who wrote it. For Ed brings to it his own vision, his uncommon talent, and a reverence for the primacy of the first writer that is a pleasure to behold.

What I'm babbling about, is that this is a helluva good book, and Ed has done a smashing job. Please make no confusion in your minds. He based it on my work and my dream, but it is pure Bryant you've got here. Which ought to lead you to his other work, and should serve to warn you that Bryant is a major talent in the field of speculative fiction.

At which point I'll jump out for a few moments to let Ed tell you about himself. I'll be back for a few final words. Ed? Are you there?

What's to say? Okay, the usual. Born 8/27/45 in White Plains, New York. Grew up in Wyoming on a ranch and in a small town (Wheatland). Went to school at the University of Wyoming, getting B.A. and M.A. degrees in English in '67 and '68. In the meantime working for small-town radio stations and diligently laboring in a stirrup buckle factory; not to forget working summers hauling baled hay and building fence.

In 1968 I discovered that the Department of State was rejecting, out-of-hand, Foreign Service Exam passers who also happened to be diabetic. Also I was sick of graduate school and reasonably sure I didn't want to teach literature in some obscure junior college. I attended the first Clarion Fantasy and Science Fiction Writers' Workshop that summer and promptly sold my first story (to *Again, Dangerous Visions*).

In 1969 I moved to Los Angeles for a lengthy stay and began selling regularly. Since then I've sold about a hundred stories and articles to most of the sf magazines; markets such as *Rolling Stone*, *National Lampoon*, *Writer's Digest*, *L.A. Free Press*, and *Knight*; and to anthologies like *Orbit*, *Quark*, *New Dimensions*, *The Last Dangerous Visions*, and so many others that Damon Knight suggested in print that I'd copped some sort of obscure record. Some of the stories have been translated into French, Portuguese, and Japanese.

My first book was a hardcover collection called *Among the Dead* (Macmillan, 1973). Some people have had difficulty locating the book because the Library of Congress initially printed up uncountable thousands of library cards for the book as being credited to one "Edwin P. Beckenbach." No one's ever explained why. But then I suppose poor Beckenbach has a book on the shelves credited to "Edward Bryant."

Also in 1973 I co-wrote the screenplay for *The Synar Calculation*, planned by the producers to be an avowed blue-collar monster movie.

So much for the “authorized” biographical facts. (Would anyone believe me if I tried to pass myself off as the last living survivor of the Romanovs? Or even as Lawrence Talbot?)

These days I live in Denver and continue to freelance, occasionally piecing things out with lecturing at schools such as the United States Air Force Academy, El Paso College, and the University of Colorado. At Northwest Community College I was lucky enough to share a lecture series with John Carradine and Vincent Price (don’t bother trying to extrapolate the common factor).

Phoenix Without Ashes is my first complete novel of speculative fiction. Current projects include *Lynx*, a linear novel; *Cinnabar*, a mosaic novel; and *Billy and the Seal Hunters*, a cautionary “children’s book” for morbid degenerates of all ages.

And I’m a dilettante inland lay-authority on sharks.

Sign off Bryant, enter Ellison for a final comment. This book is the only joy I’ve derived from months of paranoia, rip-off, and seeing my work crippled. But maybe the book is joy enough, if it takes you away from the tube and returns you to the world of personal visions to be found in reading books.

No rose at the top of that mountain of cow flop, but thank God viewers knew enough to turn channels to escape that horrendous odor.

THE STARLOST: UPDATE

On 21 March 1974, Harlan Ellison became the first person in the 26-year history of the Writers Guild of America Awards for Most Outstanding Film/TV Screenplays to win the honor *three* times. Against 400 top submissions his *original version* of the pilot script for “The Starlost,” *Phoenix Without Ashes*, was awarded the highest honor bestowed by the craft guild in Hollywood. It should be noted that the WGA Awards are given *solely* on the basis of written material, with the names of the authors removed, judged by a blue ribbon panel whose identities are kept secret. The winning script was Ellison’s version, *not* the rewritten script that was shot and aired against the creator’s wishes. When Ellison accepted the Award at the 26th Annual Awards Reception in Hollywood, he said, in part, “If the fuckers want to rewrite you... hit ‘em!”

PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES

PROLOGUE

Devon's dream: it had recurred more and more often during his sojourn in the hills. During the latter nights he had come almost to fear lying down beneath the low pine and closing his eyes. It was not so simple as being plagued by nightmares; Devon did not fear what his mind saw. Rather, he was disturbed by the disorientation, the *alienness* of his fantasy. It reminded him of the endlessly repetitive fever dreams of his childhood when he had sickened and nearly died. After the initial fever had broken and he had wakened to the calm comfort of his mother covering his forehead with a cold compress, there had still been the slight distortion, the unpleasantly vague warping of reality through the aftermath of dream.

It was something like that now. The vividness of the dream was softened with morning; yet Devon could recall the general characteristics and, increasingly, more of the details. He was young, and so he brooded over what he had seen beyond the night. He sat on the hilltop as close to the sunrise as possible, arms hugging his knees.

Here is how the dream ran:

Gray. A plane extending to an indefinite horizon. Gray. The color of Cypress Corners; the color of Devon's life. Deepening to black—the color of the rich earth, the somber long dresses of the women, the rough overalls of the men, the flat-crowned, wide-brimmed hats of the Elders.

Black, merging through gray to white; swirling like the mists rising in the autumn off the small lakes surrounding the village.

Speed, impression of motion; faster than Devon could gallop on his father's best horse. And if it were Old Devon's horse that Young Devon rode in the dream, then wicked thought! For Devon flew, hurled through the air above the treetops, the village, the lakes and fields, across the hills to the sky.

The sky loomed before him, a blue-gray surface as metallic and hard as the panels Devon had helped his father assemble into a calving shed beside the barn. The sky rushed toward Devon's face, and he would have raised his arms to protect himself, had he limbs. But the sky dissolved as he touched it: a knife penetrating smoke.

And then the night, night blacker than any new-moon midnight over Cypress Corners. Against the night, a brilliant splendor of lights; they burned steadily, unlike the pale stars blinking in the night sky above the hills.

And here, sometimes, Devon would twitch in his sleep and mumble parts of words. With his head gently cradled in her lap, Rachel had

once seen and heard him. Then Devon had come awake, disturbed, not recognizing her for a minute or two. She had gently stroked his hair as though he were still a little boy until at last clear sight came back into his eyes. He had refused to talk about the dream.

Other times, Devon awoke alone, comforted only by the grass and rough bark and the fragrant branches of which he had made his bed.

But many times, the dream continued....

He whirled, turning helplessly, and the vertigo began to clutch at his belly. The blackness and the lights and then—something else. Devon had never seen anything so huge. Nothing could be that large. Even the hills themselves and all the fields of Cypress Corners were dwarfed to insignificance by this thing. Shapes and lines and structures dwindled away in a perspective Devon's eyes had never before attempted to encompass. He stared with incomprehension as his motion continued and this thing whatever-it-was began itself to shrink, diminishing with distance until it was even less than the other lights spangling the blackness.

Then Devon felt there was nothing to touch, nothing on which to stand. Nothing, ever again.

He awoke.

ONE

Twenty kilometers above their heads, the hexagonal sun silently ticked another frame down the long track to sunset. It was early autumn, but that made no difference to the pine which shaded the couple beneath. They sat quietly, watching the village in the valley. A breeze hissed softly. A pine cone dropped to the bed of fallen needles.

“What did you tell your parents?” said Devon suddenly.

Rachel nestled her head against his shoulder without looking at him. “I do not lie to them, Devon. I said I would fetch thread from Master Cowley’s loom, and so I shall.”

“Eventually.”

“Yes, eventually.” This time she turned to face him, and this time Rachel smiled. Devon’s gray eyes, his dark hair, his slender, strong body, all pleased her.

“You’ve never lied to your parents?”

The smile left her lips. “Never.”

Something made him say, “You’d not lie about this?”

“No.” Rachel looked at him seriously. “I pray to the Creator that they never ask the right questions.”

“You’d tell?”

“I would tell them that I visit you here against their wishes and the directives of the Elders.”

The silence came back between them, made more gentle by the scent of crushed pine needles. They continued to watch the valley through the screen of brush.

The hills were rounded, falling in gentle slopes to the outlying farmsteads. Rachel and Devon were high enough to have an overview of most of Cypress Corners.

The valley was an orderly patchwork quilt, a gridwork of farms and fields, lakes and woods. Only a few kilometers distant lay the village itself. Cypress Corners was constructed in a fashion as orderly as everything else in the world: there were the houses and the several shops laid out in a careful pattern. The four narrow roads radiated out, perfectly straight, until they were stopped by the hills which approached the sky.

In the center of the town, the houses made up a circle around the Place of Worship. The houses were plastic and metal. The Place of Worship alone was solely constructed of wood. It was a somber temple, a plain, rectangular structure built of planks hewed from the trees that gave the world its name.

An inner circle inside the greater, the ring of live cypresses screened off the Place of Worship from the rest of the town. Like all else, the

cypress trees had each been placed as a component of the ordered design the planters sought.

The sun sank one more frame toward the horizon.

"I must go soon," said Rachel. "I've spent too much time here." Her elbows spread like wings as she began to wind up the long dark hair spilling down below the blades of her shoulders.

Devon stopped her hands. He buried his face in the sweet, clean scent of her hair. The words were muffled but she still understood. "I wish we could stay here together. Forever."

"I know." She gently disengaged herself. "But we cannot."

Devon started to say something.

"My mother will be impatient for Master Cowley's thread," said Rachel. Expertly she pulled her hair into a tight bun. Dropping her hands, she indicated the wicker basket at their feet. "Master Cowley will settle for less cheese than my mother believes. The bread I baked myself. There are currants. I would not have you starve, Devon."

Devon stared over the valley away from her for a moment. Then he turned back suddenly, almost angrily. "I do starve, though. Not for food. For you."

Rachel's cheeks reddened. "Please don't say those things. You should not—"

"Shouldn't I?" Devon moved closer and put his arms around her. Rachel's body stiffened slightly. He tried to kiss her; she turned her head so that his lips brushed her cheek. "Stop it," said Devon. This time she did not move her head. Devon touched her immobile lips; it was a static, unresponsive kiss. "Rachel..."

Her face only centimeters away, her gray eyes wide and candid, she said, "It is wrong to kiss, Devon. It is as wrong as it was four nights ago."

"Four nights ago," he echoed, and it was Devon's turn to color. "Rachel, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—to offend."

For a moment she looked at him steadily, and there was something hard in the planes of her face.

Her eyes... thought Devon. The eyes of her parents. The eyes of the Elders.

Then the adult dropped away and Rachel was again her seventeen years, or perhaps less. She shook her head slightly, and there were tears at the corners of her eyes. Devon's arms wound about her, and she crushed her face to his chest. There was a desperation in their embrace that transcended loneliness.

"I've got to go," said Rachel. "I've got to."

"I won't let you," said Devon stubbornly, childlike. He gently pulled her down beside him on the cushion of pine needles.

"Devon, no." But she let him kiss her again and a third time, a

fourth. Slowly, unwillingly, her body began to relax.

The late afternoon breeze eddied about the hilltop, sighing among the boughs. The chill of evening had begun. Rachel felt the chill and it frightened her.

Through the rough fabric of her black dress, Rachel felt Devon's fingers. She felt the warmth of his body and, distractedly, she rolled away from him. He followed her, his hand on her shoulder.

"I love you," said Devon.

Rachel bit her lip and said nothing.

"Do you love me?"

"I can't love you," said Rachel sensibly. She gently removed his fingers from her shoulder; but she hesitated when she stood up.

"You could love me."

Rachel stood mute. She began to shiver and drew her shawl close around her shoulders. "I can't."

Devon watched her from the ground. "Get your thread, then. Go to your parents. Hurry, lest you be too late to help prepare dinner and the world ends."

"Don't be angry," said Rachel.

"I'm not. Not at you." Devon moodily rolled over toward the valley side of the crest.

Rachel reached down and touched his hair. "I'm sorry."

"When will you come again?"

"I don't know."

"Tomorrow?"

"No, not tomorrow."

"Tomorrow night?"

"I cannot. The prayer meeting..."

"Afterward?"

"I would have to sneak," said Rachel. "This is bad enough."

"Tell them you have private devotions in the wilderness."

Rachel said, "And so I do." She smiled tentatively.

"It's a hard life in the wilderness," said Devon. "The bread and cheese will soon be gone."

Rachel wavered. "I will bring you more."

"Tomorrow night?"

"I will think about it," said Rachel. She took the pale cheese and crusty bread from her basket and handed them over.

Devon stood and took the food in his hands. He bent his head and gently kissed her again. This time Rachel resisted for the barest instant. Then she dropped the basket and hugged Devon fiercely.

The wind carried the sound of chimes up from the valley.

"The early vesper services," whispered Rachel. "It is nearly sunset." She snatched up her basket and turned toward their private path, the

one trodden out of the brush by deer.

“Tomorrow night,” said Devon.

She hesitated, said nothing, and then fled down the hillside toward the ordered patterns of Cypress Corners.

TWO

Devon cut for himself a meager supper of bread and cheese. Earlier he had checked his snares; they were simple traps of wire and bent branches. Apparently they were not sophisticated enough to fool the rabbits. Two loops lay untouched. The bait, cheese from Rachel's last gift of food, was missing. The third snare had been sprung, but nothing was caught in the dangling loop. Again, the cheese bait was gone.

Devon reset the traps, this time using bits of bread for bait. Then he returned to his vantage point above Cypress Corners. He had yet to determine in his own mind why he was living in temporary exile on the very frontier of the Elders.

Early on, he had tramped across the relatively narrow band of hills until he neared the sky itself. There he stopped short, heeding the childhood admonition never to approach the sky. It occurred to him later to wonder why not. But at the time, it was a virtually automatic impulse to turn around and return to the margin of civilization. So he showed his back to the hard, blue-gray sky and retraced his steps to the top of this hill overlooking Cypress Corners.

Below, the bells sounded for late vespers. In the east, to Devon's right, the moon had begun to rise. Its white aureole extended above the hills. As Devon watched, wrapped in his ratty woolen blanket and gnawing on a chunk of cheese rind, the moon rose into full frame. In its six-sided austerity, the moon cast a glow across the valley. Shadows sprang out in sharp relief. The moon was nearly full; a harvest sign.

Cypress Corners lay perfectly still, the final chimes for vespers fading on the night wind. The village houses with their lighted windows made up a perfectly set ornament in the night. From this perspective, the town possessed a deceptive brightness, almost an air of warmth and cheer. Yet no one knew this but Devon, for no one but Devon looked down on Cypress Corners.

And even had they looked down, not one in a hundred would have thought anything less prosaic than: *Were the night but shorter! I have wheat to harvest, apples to pick, sheep to shear.*

Devon looked down and thought of Rachel. He turned his head to the west and tried to pick out the farmstead of Aram and Old Rachel. He thought he could see the illuminated rectangle of Rachel's loft window, but finally decided he was imagining it.

He continued to fantasize it as he pulled together the stuff of his bed, the boughs and brush that made a slightly more comfortable mattress than his usual pallet in Cypress Corners. Devon pulled the

blanket around himself and checked to be sure that his knife was close by his right hand. The predators of the hills had not yet bothered him, but there might always be a first time.

Devon lay so that the opaque crown of the pine screened him from the direct glow of the full moon. Half his sky was the dark tree; the other half was the stars. He lay on his back and watched them blink.

Then something struck him which had not occurred to him before: there was a pattern to the twinkling of the stars. He had been picking out the constellations his father had taught him years before. The Cross. The Altar. The Ring of Order.

His eyes skipped back to the crossbar of the Cross. The bright star on the left end blinked twice to the three blinks of the lesser star on the right. Again. Over and over with no variation. The crux star in the center winked three times, but in opposition to its neighbor on the right.

The patterns repeated as Devon watched.

Is there really infinite order? he thought. *Can nothing change?* He realized he was falling asleep and decided not to resist the gentle falling away of his consciousness. *Never?*

Once again it was the same dream for Devon, but this time it took an odd tangent:

A speck, a dot that slowly magnified in his vision. It ballooned in gigantic size and complexity until it was he who was the speck.

It swelled until Devon could not see the whole of it with his eyes. It reminded him of the grapes he had helped harvest from the arbors of Old Garth. Devon saw a cluster of shining grapes that extended on forever.

Closer.... The grapes were not grapes; they were hard, like the sky, with ridges, domes, stalks like the woods mushrooms, tubes, bulbs, glistening metal spiderwebs.

And closer.... The domed structures surrounded Devon like a forest of giant toadstools. He tried to pull them all into the range of his vision, but they seemed to stretch away along infinite vistas. The dream-Devon strained; some sort of perspective dilated and it was more painful than the stretching of unused muscles.

Then the domes and the towers between them began to burn. Golden flames burst up all around the dream-Devon, but he felt no pain. The globes of sky-stuff began to waver and distort.

Devon saw Rachel standing among the fires; now he felt the heat, but it was not unpleasant. Their eyes met, and she smiled. In a momentary bit of shock, Devon saw that she was naked. He had never seen a naked woman other than the exaggerated wooden figurines Old Elijah at one time carved and hid away for his private and obscure reasons. Devon, Garth, and the

other young boys had more than once sneaked up to the smeared panes of the locked woodshed. They would creep close, silent, and watch Old Elijah whittling away inside.

The domes guttered and began to run like poor wax. Still smiling enigmatically, Rachel extended her arms to Devon. Her lips moved, shaping words, but Devon could not tell what they were.

He attempted to move toward her, but Rachel retreated. Stop, he willed. Let me come to you. Her pale arms still extended toward him, yet he could not touch her. The inferno flared up anew and Rachel vanished.

Devon was alone with the alien, unwavering specks set against the blackness. The dream continued inevitably.

When Devon awoke, it was still night. The moon had set beyond the western hills. He stared up at the bar of the Cross, which still blinked its three-two-three pattern, and felt a wrenching sense of inestimable frustration and loss.

THREE

There were dreams also for Rachel that night.

At first Old Rachel wondered if perhaps she had scolded her daughter overly much for her tardiness in bringing the thread from Master Cowley. Rachel had said nothing; only lowered her eyes and accepted her mother's admonitions in an attitude of proper filial respect. But during the preparation of supper, she had bumbled about the kitchen in a daze: she allowed the mutton to char, let the potato water boil over, did not notice until far too late that her younger sister was sneaking sticky handfuls from the sugar bin.

"Rachel, you must not be a trial to me in my old age," said her mother.

At the meal, Rachel dropped the serving platter of bread. The dish shattered and crusts bounced everywhere.

"Daughter, what is the matter?" said Aram.

Rachel looked at him blankly. "Nothing, Father." She bent and retrieved the bread. The floor was excruciatingly clean; not a crumb would go to waste.

Aram continued talking about his ambitious reseeding program for the lower meadow. Old Rachel glanced appraisingly at her daughter. As was her custom, she said almost nothing during the meal; only making brief agreement with her husband when agreement seemed necessary.

For Rachel, evening prayer dragged past with infinite slowness. The two women and the girl kept their places at the table while Aram retrieved the Book from its hallowed resting place above the mantle. He set the heavy, leather-bound volume on the table and opened it to the golden marker. Beyond the marker lay perhaps a third of the pages. As he did every evening, Aram would read passages from the Book. When he at last reached the final page in another year, he would start over from the beginning. Aram had read the Book aloud many times during his life.

"And so it was that Sarah came to lie with..." Aram began. His voice trailed off and he frowned. Lips moving as he silently formed the words, Aram let his finger trail down the column until he came to a less objectionable passage. He began again. "And lo! In the kingdom of..."

Rachel looked demurely down at the table. She hoped there was no more than the normal color in her cheeks. On impulse she glanced up and saw Old Rachel looking across the table at her. Rachel, again averted her eyes and prayed her father to hurry.

After reading nearly a dozen pages, Aram closed the Book and

initiated a prayer of supplication to the Creator: "O Maker, in this the season of thy bounty, we beseech thee..."

Rachel had long since memorized every millimeter of wood pattern in the plastic tabletop. *Dear Lord, the Creator*, she thought. *Don't let them read my mind and know I allowed Devon to kiss me. Please!*

"... thy servants. Amen."

Led by Old Rachel's still-sweet soprano, they sang three slow, dirgelike hymns. Then a final benediction by Aram and evening prayers were over. Not looking at her parents Rachel bid them a polite good night and followed her sister up the ladder to the loft.

Rachel's dream:

They swam in Old Jacob's millpond, the two of them, Devon and herself. The water in the holding pond, warm with the summer's heat, caressed her skin as no cloth could do.

For a moment the dream was rippled by Rachel's nearly conscious thought that she had never swum with a male. Then the thought submerged like a diving fish and the dream flowed on. With the flats of their hands they splashed each other; the spray made her skin glisten in the sunlight.

Devon motioned toward the grassy shore. Rachel followed him out of the pond. They climbed onto the bank and lay down in the shade of an ancient cypress. There were no words, only Devon's gray eyes and the lingering, silken touch of his fingers.

She did not know what he was doing. There was pleasure, to be sure, but it was obscure and without center. Rachel looked at his face; all Devon's features, everything she recognized was there. But below his face, everything was vague; the lines of his limbs blurred, except for his hands and feet; other shapes were soft and indistinct.

She knew he was doing things to her, something to her body. But still she had no visualization or definition. The pleasure continued, intensified. Rachel rolled her head back and forth on the grassy bank.

She awoke.

Rachel looked sharply across the feather-filled bed. It was difficult to tell in the gloom of the loft; she did not think her sister was awake. Rachel listened intently. At last she decided that the soft, regular breathing had confirmed that Ruth was asleep.

Rachel slowly rolled onto her side, carefully lifting the comforter away from her sweaty skin. She lay still for a minute, letting her own breathing become regular. Her gown had ridden up around her waist. Gingerly she touched the forbidden place between her legs.

She felt the wetness and jerked her hand away.

What has happened? she thought.

The dream, like most fantasies, had raveled in the short time since

waking. Yet some feeling lingered. She remembered something of the pond and the grass and of gentle fingers. Shame swept around her; shame and something else. She recognized the stranger. It was pleasure.

FOUR

The night ended as the sun rose and the cycle began again: twelve hours of work, eight hours of prayer, eight hours of sleep. Each day the same, the regimen unvarying. Devon sat hidden atop his hill, overseeing the busy, hive activity of Cypress Corners. At the noon, he finished the last of the bread and cheese. Afterward, he still seemed to watch the valley, but his gaze was inward, speculating about his dreams. Toward dusk, he visited the futile rabbit snares. Then he returned to the valley overlook to await darkness.

It was considerably later when Rachel climbed the secret path to the crest. The swollen moon had long since risen; the bell summons to Cypress Corners' thrice-weekly prayer assembly was hours past. The autumn chill had intensified so Rachel wore her dark cloak. With her she brought a basket of food.

She stumbled and nearly fell over the brush at the top of the trail. Devon stepped out of the shadows and caught her. Rachel stifled a cry. He took the basket and guided her to their usual place beside the pine.

"I worried that you wouldn't come," said Devon.

"It was a long meeting," said Rachel. "Elder Micah's sermon went on forever. But that's not important." She tilted her head up and kissed him happily.

Devon said, "What's happened? You're excited."

"The Elders met, Devon. They've decided you can end your exile and come back to Cypress Corners."

Devon said nothing.

"What's the matter?" said Rachel. "You can go home now."

He laughed bitterly. "I have no home."

She said, "The farm of Old Devon—"

"What farm? I should rebuild it out of the ashes?"

"Everyone will help. Of course you can build it again."

"And have to end up beholding to the likes of Elder Jubal and Elder Micah? I'd rather stay here in the hills."

She clung to him. "Don't say that, Devon. Your home is down there. When Elder Jubal comes up here on the morrow to deliver your summons, accompany him back to Cypress Corners."

"What about you?" Devon said. "My home is down there only if it's with you."

"Don't say that. I'm bringing you good news and you try to hurt me."

"No," he said, stroking her hair. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Then will you think about the Elders' summons?"

After a while he slowly nodded.

“Now let’s talk about something else,” Rachel said.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

He told her about his latest dream, judiciously editing out some of the details. Devon attempted to describe the vistas he had glimpsed and the strange, giant structures that dwarfed even Cypress Corners; but words came disjointedly, failed him, and he wished he could show her. All the same, it disappointed him when Rachel seemed to shuffle aside the true wonders of what his mind had seen.

“I was there in your dream?” she said.

“It was no other.”

“And I held out my arms to you?”

“As though you wished me to come.”

She said, “And you did not?”

“I couldn’t. I came closer and you moved away.”

“That’s odd,” she murmured. “You did not move away when...” Her voice trailed off.

“When what?”

Glad for the mask of tree-filtered moonlight, Rachel said, “I was visited last night.”

“By what?”

“My parents and the Elders would say an incubus, a night demon.”

“And what would *you* say?”

She shook her head. “It took your form as I lay asleep.” She hesitated. “I cannot call it a demon.”

Devon smiled. “You dreamed of me.”

“Indeed,” Rachel said quietly.

“Was it pleasant?”

Again, hesitation. “Yes.”

“Was it pleasurable?”

“It was sinful.”

Devon considered the distinct planes of her face as he carefully chose his words. “I’ve had much time to think, up here. I’ve come to— to conclusions.” He took a breath and the words came closer together, as though he feared to hold them in. “I’ve come to the conclusion that things which give pleasure are not necessarily sinful.”

Soberly she said. “That is counter to the teachings of the Book.”

He met her gaze. “I know it, but I think it’s something I can now accept.”

“The Elders—”

“And neither,” he said, “are *they* necessarily infallible.”

“Devon, why do we always seem to talk of things which trouble me?”

He gently framed her head with his fingers. "Then I'll speak of other things tonight." He touched her chin. "Shall I talk of Aram's early barley crop?"

"Don't make fun of me."

Their kiss was tender and tentative, as it had been the year before when they had first met secretly in the woods beside Aram's lower meadow.

Devon said, "Tell me about your dream."

"I cannot. That would be a sin."

"The dream, or the telling?"

"Both."

"Tell me..." He drew her closer and they shared the warm shelter of her winter cloak. "Is this a sin?" Again he kissed her.

"Yes. I think so. I don't know." Rachel shook her head agitatedly.

"Was it a sin to come here tonight?"

"Yes," said Rachel. "Yes. I sneaked from the house and woke no one." She felt his fingers trail across the secret places of her body.

"Devon—"

"A knowing sin? But why?"

Rachel felt her body begin to move, as though of its own volition. She felt peculiarly detached. "I can now sin," she said. "I am already damned."

"We are neither of us damned," said Devon. He touched her and at first she did not resist at all.

The moon seemed to race down its track to the west. The darkness of moonfall and the unlighted valley were no less black than the dark sanctuary within the folds of cloak and woolen blanket.

"Perhaps it was because we sinned," said Rachel.

"No!" said Devon angrily and in frustration. His voice softened. "I think it was because we both were frightened." He carefully traced the topography of her invisible face. "It can't be sin just to touch each other."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He wasn't sure what she meant, but replied, "No. I'm sorry."

They lay silent until the quiet became uncomfortable for both of them. "Devon?"

"What."

"Tomorrow. Will you come back to Cypress Corners?"

"Maybe."

It was nearly dawn when Rachel smoothed her long dress, got up stiffly from the pine boughs, and started down the hillside.

FIVE

He was getting too old, Elder Jubal kept telling himself, to be running these errands for the Council. Too old, too slow, too tired. But then who among the Elders was not old? No one. Jubal answered his own question and continued picking his way up the steep hillside. Overhead the sun was framed precisely at noon.

If the Creator wishes me to die here of apoplexy, Jubal thought, *then let it be His will*. He sighed morosely and stopped to gather his breath. Jubal tilted back the flat brim of his hat and scanned the slope ahead. *Where is the boy?*

The hillside was matted with thick grass that had begun to yellow with the season. No one's flock had grazed this slope for a cycle. Eventually they would, once the pasture below was depleted.

That was the plan, thought Jubal. The flocks would graze, the hills would then be left undisturbed again, spring would return to the valley; another cycle would swing 'round. Everything by order of the plan. Jubal smiled to himself.

Being somewhat more portly than most of the other Elders, he had begun to puff. He stopped to wipe the sweat from his forehead, then realized how close was the top of the hill. Jubal deliberately concentrated on placing one foot after the other until he reached the summit. Once there he paused, trembling with exertion.

"And was it a pleasant climb, Elder?"

Jubal raised his head and saw Devon lying beneath a pine. The young man was sprawled, his own head cradled comfortably by a hammock of laced fingers. For a moment Jubal wished a sudden, terrible fate upon that young man; those fine, strong young limbs withered and broken. For the barest moment. Then Jubal let charity sweep back through his soul.

"Young Devon, is that a suitable position of respect?"

Devon got to his feet and stretched lazily. "I am not Young Devon. Only Devon. Have you forgotten, Elder?"

"I had not forgotten," said Jubal. "It is more than ten cycles since Old Devon perished and was joined with the Creator."

"Twelve," said Devon.

"Twelve, then. Have a care with thy tongue, boy."

"Of course, sir."

"Do not mock me," said Jubal.

"No, sir."

The old man felt a tendril of anger rising. He smothered it with a pious thought. "No matter," he said. "I bring thee a summons from the Council of Elders."

Devon awaited silently.

“It has been ordained,” continued Jubal, “that thee shall cease thy stay here in the hills and shall appear once more before the Council. The noon service has commenced. Elder Micah awaits thee at the Place of Worship.”

“Why am I summoned?” said Devon.

“That is a matter for Elder Micah to explain. It is merely thy duty to obey the summons.” With some irritation, Jubal felt the rub of new blisters on the leather-shod undersides of his feet. He added, “Were it my sole decision, I would allow thee to range these hills until recantation brought thee low.”

“I would like that,” Devon said.

“You might starve thyself, boy.”

Devon shook his head. “I have trapped rabbits.”

Jubal looked around the hilltop as though searching for remnants.

“Beyond the next hill,” said Devon. “Almost to the sky. I built a fire.”

Jubal looked disappointed. “This was to be a time of cleansing tribulation. It is instructive to suffer and endure, boy.”

“I did, Elder.”

“It was to be a time for meditation and reflection.”

“That also, I did, Elder.”

“And a time for repentance.”

Devon turned away from the old man and faced the valley. “Yes, Elder.”

“Recalcitrant whelp,” Jubal said under his breath. He started back down the path. “Come, Elder Micah waits prayers for us.” He heard no following footsteps. Jubal turned and saw Devon still at the tree, still facing the valley with that irritating, faraway glaze upon his eyes. “Devon!”

Devon’s reverie broke. “Yes, Elder?”

A peremptory command: “Come!”

The young man followed the old down toward Cypress Corners.

There were times when Granny Esther wished for less than wholly pious reasons that Young Garth were her son. Now, as she watched him labor over the garden shears on the anvil, was one of those times. There was much to appreciate about the young smith. It wasn’t just the unruly thatch of curly black hair, nor the candid dark eyes, she thought, though those were indeed attractive.

Neither was it solely the fine musculature sweat-gleaming in the heat of the forge. (Garth had often volunteered to help her toil in her vegetable garden—a kindness the aging woman acknowledged with plates of Garth’s favorite carrot cake.) No, Garth possessed a

combination of intangible qualities she could codify only as some essence of *son-ness*: honesty, strength, a seemingly inflexible sense of duty. Not, she reflected with some sadness, like her own son; or, the Creator forefend, like *his* son, Young Esau.

"They're done, Granny Esther." Garth examined the rivet critically, clacked the blades together several times, and then handed the shears to the woman.

"Such a fine job. I thank thee, boy." She placed the shears in her reticule. "Will you accompany me now to the noon service? Elder Micah would have all in the congregation attend this day."

"I suppose I must." Garth spoke without enthusiasm. "You sound reluctant," said the old woman. "Is it because of Rachel?"

"And Devon too," said Garth. "He must obey the Elder's summons and stand before the Council's judgment today."

"I'm sure they will be lenient. The Creator's mercy is infinite."

Garth splashed water on himself from a bucket, then towed his arms dry. "They will not permit Rachel and Devon to marry."

"Of course not. The Creator has decreed otherwise." Garth slapped his arm viciously with the towel. "The Creator has decreed that Rachel and I wed. It is not her wish."

"Is it yours?" said Granny Esther gently.

He looked anguished. "No."

"The Creator's ways aren't always apparent."

"I feel pain for both Rachel and Devon. They are my friends."

She laid a comforting hand on his thick wrist. "Trust in the wisdom of the Council." She gave him a look he found enigmatic. "Do whatever you must do to act justly."

They departed for the Place of Worship.

SIX

Midday prayer services had begun by the time Jubal and Devon had crossed the bleaching fields of downed alfalfa and entered the town. They alone trod the dusty street toward the center of Cypress Corners. As they neared the circle of trees surrounding the Place of Worship, Jubal said, "Hold." The two men stopped.

Devon heard the sound of light laughter from behind a metal ivy-climb—traditionally called a "communicator booth"—across the narrow street. Jubal stalked over to the dull-gray pillar and Devon followed.

Aha! said the Elder. Devon peered around Jubal's shoulder to see who had been confronted. It was a young boy, perhaps eight or nine. He was clad like his male Elders in a white collarless shirt of rough homespun material and black cotton overalls that came up in bib fashion with straps over the shoulders. He was barefoot and was rolling a shining metal stave hoop with a metal rod.

"Young Jacob!" said Jubal.

The small boy looked sheepish.

"Dost thou know what hour it be?"

Young Jacob thought for a moment. "Aye, sir. Twelve-hundred hours, sir."

"Nearly thirteen-hundred hours," corrected Jubal. "Second worship hour, lad. Long since time you were at your prayers. No time for idleness and wicked laughter."

"I beg pardon, sir," said the boy. He stared contritely down at the street. As his head dropped, Devon was sure he saw Young Jacob wink. Elder Jubal grunted a perfunctory acceptance of the apology.

"Then be about it, lad; hie thee to thy place of kneeling and rid thyself of impure, wicked thoughts lest the Elders mete out severity."

Head still hanging respectfully, Young Jacob dropped his hoop and stave beside the ivy-climb and scampered through the ring of cypress toward the steps leading up to the Place of Worship.

Jubal watched, shaking his head at the frivolity of the young. "I'll never understand those to whom piety doesn't come early," he said, reverting momentarily from the stiff, formal speech usually affected by the Elders. "It makes things so..." He hesitated. "So *inexact*."

"You were once young," said Devon.

"I think not." His face set in dour lines. Jubal led Devon up the wide, plank steps. From between the cypress doors they could hear a voice.

"Hush," said Jubal. "Elder Micah's sermon..." Devon recognized the voice; words as hard and cold as the mica schist he had found half-

buried in the hills.

“One hundred kilometers across be the world of Cypress Corners,” said the voice of Elder Micah. “One hundred kilometers be all the plot of land given us by the Creator. To work and nourish and on which to find our salvation. ‘Twould be simple for thee to fall into the wicked thought that there be *more* to the good life, the life given to the service of the Creator, than these one hundred kilometers; that there be thought ne’er thought, deed ne’er done, that thou might rise above thy fellows with certain deed and certain thought...”

Again with a gesture for silence, Jubal led Devon between the slab-sided doors of the Place of Worship. The interior was barnlike in its spaciousness and simplicity of arrangement. A center aisle led to the front. On either side the congregation, all in black, sat in the hard metal pews. A few heads turned to look as Jubal and Devon advanced down the aisle. Like a whip-crack, Elder Micah’s voice brought them back to eyes-forward.

“...and that the will of the Elders may be summarily flouted. Be there aught amongst ye who feel so?”

At the front of the Place of Worship was a low platform. Elder Micah stood behind a metal lectern. On the bare wall behind him there was only a burnished metal circle; for the Elders, the symbol of Belief.

Jubal conducted Devon to the aisle seat of the front row. Throughout the room there was a barely audible rustle of whispers. Tall, gaunt, forbidding, Micah leaned forward across the lectern and fixed his gaze on Devon. He repeated,

“Be there aught amongst ye who feel so?”

Quick replies from the congregation; loud but reverent: “Nay!”

“Nay, Elder Micah!”

“Nay, nay!”

Like a herd of horses being led to the barley trough, thought Devon. He nearly laughed. In the dim light from the slit windows, Micah’s eyes seemed almost to burn.

“And what say you, Devon? Be your humbleness merely worn like shirt or shoe? Dost thou harbor secret spite ‘gainst thy Elders?”

Devon knew he was expected to dip his head in humility; yet he did not. He stared directly into Micah’s eyes. “Not spite, Elder Micah, but there are questions I would ask you.”

Micah smiled slightly, but completely without humor. “Even in thy speech thou art troubling. Thou callest thy Elder ‘you’ with all familiarity. Thy stay in the hills hast done nought to cleanse thee!”

It took all the resolve he had generated in the hills to reply. Devon said quietly, firmly: “If it’s love of Rachel you want to ‘cleanse’ from me, a hundred cycles in the hills would not serve.”

Micah raised his gaze from Devon to the congregation and they responded—murmurs, then louder and angrier cries, shouts:

“Impiety!”

“He answers back!”

“He should be driven out!”

Another grim smile. Obviously pleased with the response, Micah raised his hands for quiet. The Elder looked back down at Devon. “Set this thought forefront in thy demeanor, Devon: thy parents be long dead, thy station be of the lowest, thy prospects slim, thy manner bitter as water drawn from the pollution pool. Thy genetic rating unsuitable. Thou art maintained in Cypress Corners as ward of the Elders. Young Rachel...”

He looked above Devon again, and to the right. Devon turned his head slightly. Rachel sat there in the next pew behind. She sat with her younger sister, the two of them between Aram and Old Rachel. Hands folded, eyes downcast, Rachel did not react.

Micah continued harshly, “... Young Rachel is promised since birth to Young Garth...”

Young Garth sat between his mother and father in the pew behind Rachel and her family. The same age as Devon, Garth was half a head taller. He was a broad and solid man; deeply tanned from the fields, but also callused and muscular from the hammer, forge, and anvil of the metalsmith to whom he was apprenticed. Garth and Devon had been friends almost as long as each could remember. Now Devon caught Garth’s eye and Garth looked away.

“...promised by the word of the Creator’s machine,” Micah’s voice droned on. “Dost thee *still* question the decision of the Creator?”

Devon looked from Garth to Rachel and then back to Micah. He said angrily, “I *still* question! I still ask why the sky is metal and the ground is not. I still ask where waste goes when we put it down the trap. I still ask why Young Rachel must wed a man she doesn’t love!”

Again Micah’s gaze rose to the congregation. Again, led by the other Elders, they responded like a well-trained pack of dogs with cries of “Blasphemy!” and “Shame!” And again Micah quieted them with a wave of his hand.

“When first thee came to thy Elders with this blasphemy,” said the Elder, “thy anguish was met with kindness. Thou wert given leave to go to the hills to cleanse thyself. But thee hath returned to our prayer time still surfeited with recrimination and wickedness. See this, ungrateful child.”

Micah stabbed the center of the lectern with one forefinger. “Perhaps you may give heed to the Creator’s machine.” There was a low whirl. From out of the lectern rose a miniature replica of the rectangular, metal ivy-climb outside. The Elder touched one of a row

of keys on the top of the Creator's machine. A panel slid aside; Micah spoke into the exposed grille: "Respond to my voice. I seek again the answer to the mating question of Young Rachel and Young Garth. Be there genetic relevance for consideration of Devon as mate to Young Rachel? Answer."

The machine chuckled briefly to itself as though a small animal inside were rummaging through nutshells. After a moment it spoke; its voice was loud and flat. "Gene pool orders original mating selection without variance. New factor, coded: Devon, unsuitable. Balance maintained. Answerrrr..." The voice of the Creator distorted, dropped in pitch, slowed down. Micah tensed, staring down at the machine. "Answer: none."

With triumphant finality, Micah punched a key on the top of the Creator's machine and the device began to whirl back down into the lectern. The lines in Micah's lean face bunched hard. "Now, spiteful Devon, before this congregation, in the sight of the Creator and in the Creator's words, thou hast been spurned. Wilt thou *now* relent? And join with thy betters in conjoining these two young people?"

Devon said nothing as he stared back at Micah and the lowering top of the Creator's machine. He opened his mouth but no words emerged.

"*Wilt thou?*" said Micah.

Devon turned his head toward Rachel.

She met his eyes; her gaze fell first.

He turned toward Garth.

The smith's apprentice would not meet Devon's eyes.

"*Wilt thou, boy?*" Micah repeated the words implacably, giving them edges like hammered metal.

Devon opened his mouth again, but words still would not come. Clenching his fists, he turned and bolted from the Place of Worship. Whispers ran through the congregation until Micah raised a paternal hand. "This boy has been possessed by a fine wickedness. From this moment forward, henceforth let no member of this congregation speak unto Devon, let no soul touch his, let no notice be made of him. For us, humble in the name of the Creator, this Devon is a spitefulness, a contentiousness, a spot of rancor. Let him be, then, gone from our sight. Now: return to thy labors."

The congregation rose, facing the circle design on the rear wall. Each man and woman and child linked thumb and forefinger over their hearts as a symbol of their piety. Even Garth. Even Rachel.

SEVEN

The forge of Old William the metalsmith was an open shed on the northern edge of the village. Old William seldom took up the iron hammer these days; the stiffness in his joints was too painful. He had turned the major responsibility for his craft over to his young apprentice. Old William had taught his charge well; there were seldom complaints from those who ordered tools from the new smith.

Devon waited in the half-concealment afforded by the shadows beneath a copse of elm. The rest of Cypress Corners's commerce started up around him while, he awaited Garth's return. Voices passed him on the other side of the row of trees: men returning to the fields. "Devon was never all that clever."

"I know *I* would not wish to be cast into the darkness by Elder Micah."

Mumbles of assent.

"I don't know.... That Rachel's quite a piece."

"Hush, lest Aram hear you."

"He returned to fetch the water skin."

"Nonetheless, don't defile his daughter with your tongue."

Someone's half-stifled laughter. "I know *I'd* like to..." The voices faded out of earshot. Devon lay back, his head resting on the hard pillow of an exposed root.

A few minutes later, Garth arrived at the forge. Devon continued to wait, watching as Garth resumed his work. His childhood friend was obviously distraught; Garth's face was a mask of gloom. He clattered about the shed, futilely kicking a bucket of scrap nails across the room when the thing failed to get out of his way. Garth turned the gas jets of the forge up to full. With the tongs, he thrust a horseshoe into the roaring, orange flame.

If only he loved Rachel, Devon thought briefly, and then wiped the thought away. *No, I do not wish that at all*. He realized how truly selfish he was. One more sin.

In the fire, the metal shoe began to glow a dull cherry red.

The color, Devon remembered, *of the embers of the house*. Years later he had wondered at the cruelty of children toward one of their fellows who had been orphaned. *Perhaps they feared the same fate, and, fearing turned on the source of that alarm*.

Six of them had cornered Devon in a glade beside the small lake called Temperance. Not yet ten cycles old, he had looked warily from one to another of the older boys. He said, "What do you want?"

Young Goodman laughed nastily and said, "Just your garments,

Devon.”

Devon looked puzzled.

Esau, a thin, cross-eyed child, said, “The Elders have directed us to clean Master Silas’s school and we need your clothing for rags.”

“I don’t understand,” said Devon. “Why—”

Without warning, Goodman struck him in the face.

Though surprised, Devon struck back automatically, hitting Goodman in the throat. All the other boys save Esau rushed into the fray.

“Bastard!” cried Esau from the sideline. “In naked shame we’ll send you to the women.”

Goodman had grappled with Devon. Breath ratcheted from the older boy’s mouth. He echoed Esau, “Bastard.”

Superior size and age finally prevailed: four of the boys held Devon’s limbs to the ground. Goodman and Esau stood back from the spreadeagled figure. Goodman still found it difficult to breathe, much less speak. “Beg for—” The words garbled as he choked. “—fatherless —”

Esau roughly jerked loose Devon’s belt and pulled his overalls down around his knees. Devon struggled but his captors held fast. “You’re the bastards,” he said. Goodman drew his foot back to kick. Then he was knocked sprawling.

“Garth!” Esau cried. Even at the age of ten cycles, Young Garth was fearless. Large for his age, he knocked the boys aside as though they were wheat going down before the scythe. After they got up, they joined Esau and fled.

Without allies, Goodman had no stomach to fight further. He took a tentative step toward Garth; then, thinking better of it, he wordlessly turned and ran away. Garth helped Devon to his feet.

“I thank you,” said Devon, “but why did you help? This wasn’t your fight.”

“Six of them,” said Garth. “It was not right.” He looked embarrassed.

Devon gingerly touched his own nose, checking for blood. “They called me a bastard.” He looked belligerently at Garth. “I had a father and a mother.”

“Yes,” said Garth. “I know. I liked them.”

The two boys silently walked along the shore of the lake Temperance. Then Garth said, “I’m on my way to prayers.” Devon said nothing. “Will you walk with me to the town?”

After that afternoon they remained friends.

And now, is this right? said Devon silently. He stood up and walked toward the shed.

His back to the wide doorway, Garth turned the glowing horseshoe over in the flame. He pulled it from the jet, examined it critically, then set it on the anvil. With his other hand he picked up the three-kilo iron hammer.

Devon paused in the shadow of the entrance, listening to the clang of metal against metal, seeing the orange sparks fan out with each blow. He was struck by the power and rhythm of the smith; it was a steady, reassuring song.

Clang!

Devon stepped through the doorway. At the sound of hard sod-boot heels on the threshold, Garth looked around.

Clang!

The rhythm faltered only slightly. Garth turned back to the anvil. Again the hammer swung in its arc.

Clang!

“Garth.”

Clang! There was no response.

Devon said, “I’m sorry. I had to do it.”

Clang! Garth looked up. With a flash of annoyance. Still he said nothing and returned to hammering with even greater vehemence.

Devon moved around the anvil where Garth could not avoid seeing him. “Try to understand. It doesn’t have to be the way the Elders say it is. If you loved Rachel, or she loved you, I would never have spoken.”

Clang!

“Garth...”

Garth stopped. He stood with red-hot shoe in tongs in one hand and hammer in the other. For a moment, Devon thought Garth would hurl one or both at him. Then Garth turned and quenched the shoe in the water bucket. He watched Devon through the steam.

Devon said, “Will you at least listen—”

Garth interrupted him. He turned his eyes toward the wall and spoke. “I have been humiliated in the eyes of my fellows. My family, and especially my father, have lost stature. I have been badly used.” He reached across the bench and picked up the bow portion of a steel crossbow. Holding it against the light from the doorway, he squinted along the bow’s length, searching for imperfection. An expert marksman, he lavished no greater love on any of the other tools he had crafted.

“Garth, we’ve known each other all our lives. We’ve been friends.”

With the tongs, Garth began heating one end of the bow.

“Won’t you please try to understand?”

Garth said to the wall, “I would rather talk to my friend than to this wall.”

“I am here.”

“If someone were here to hear me now,” Garth continued inexorably, “I would say that the past is done, and what the Elders have decreed is what is *now*. I would say that none of this makes me happy, but I am Old Garth’s son and I will not suffer him to lose status because of me. I will do what I am told.”

Devon said, “Do you know what Elder Micah will have done to me?”

Garth looked obdurately from wall to bow.

“I am to die.”

Shocked, the smith looked directly at Devon. “No—even Elder Micah would not be so harsh.”

“Let no member of this congregation speak unto Devon,” Devon quoted. “Let no soul touch his, let no notice be made of him.”

“He will relent—”

“You know better, Garth. Micah would have me exiled forever to the hills. I cannot spend the rest of my life foraging for rabbits or stealing from the fields. That was a sentence of death.”

“I can’t believe—”

“Believe,” said Devon.

A hardness slipped down over Garth’s features. He said, “*I will do what I am told.*”

Devon stood for a moment longer, looking at Garth; then, very sadly, he turned to go. He paused at the door. Garth hammered lightly on the crossbow. “I understand, Garth. And I’m sorry. I wish you weren’t in the middle of this.”

He exited and heard the hiss of steam as the bow was plunged into the bucket.

EIGHT

For perverse purposes he could not later fathom, Devon wandered the remainder of the afternoon through the streets of Cypress Corners. He deliberately intruded into citizens' spheres of attention, trying to stir reactions. He was seldom rewarded.

In Old Martin's market, he discovered elderly, widowed, near-sighted Old Esther purchasing a cut of beef. The bell jangled as Devon opened the door and walked in. Old Martin glanced up, glowered, then, stony-faced, returned his attention to his customer. Devon came up to the counter. "Hello, Granny Esther," he said.

The old woman turned around and peered up into his face. "Oh, hello, Devon. My goodness, I—oops," she said, suddenly remembering her duty. She was distantly related to Devon, a several-times-removed aunt.

Old Martin said irritably, "It's a fine bit of steak, Granny Esther. Cut right from the rib of the animal. Look at the marbling."

Devon reached over and started to pick up the steak; Martin snatched it back. "Better look close, Granny," Devon said. "The marbling isn't so visible."

Ignoring him, Martin said, "Good red meat."

"Old meat," said Devon. "Old Martin's always kept a bottle of red dye behind the counter. Everybody knows." He started to reach over the counter, and Martin grabbed his wrist. "Don't you remember?" Devon said to him. "Only you and Granny Esther are here." Martin's fingers slowly loosened.

Granny Esther held the meat a few inches from her eyes, meticulously examining it. "Hmm, you know, Martin, I don't believe this is as fresh as it could be."

"Of course it's fresh," said the shopkeeper. "Who says it isn't?"

"Well... no one. But just the same," said Granny Esther, "I think that tonight I'll fix me a vegetable stew." She smiled a fragile smile and turned away from the counter. Martin slapped the steak back into the case as though it were a dead fish.

At the door, Granny Esther looked at Devon with a wise, sidelong expression. "Don't worry, child," she whispered. "I've long known Micah. He's a hard man, but he'll show mercy."

Devon tried to smile at her. *But what must I do to earn that mercy?* he thought.

"You must pray," said the old woman. She smiled up at him as he held the door open. Old Esther shuffled out into the street.

Old Martin continued standing with iron control behind the counter as Devon took a cracker from the barrel by the door before leaving.

A sharp pain sprouted suddenly between his shoulder blades. Devon sprawled forward in the dust. "Aye, brother Esau," said a grating voice. "I could have sworn I just ran into something."

"It could not be," said a second voice. "There is nothing at all."

Devon raised himself with his forearms and looked around. Two young men stood above him, grinning as they ostentatiously looked past.

"Aye," said the first man. "Agreed. There is nothing whatever." He rubbed the knuckles of his right hand.

"Young Esau," said Devon. "Young Goodman." They were both about his age; both stoutly built and wearing the same type of shirt, overalls, and boots that he did. He remembered them for being two of the attackers from whom Garth had rescued him so many cycles before.

"Do you hear something?" said Young Esau.

"I hear the wind." Both young men laughed uproariously. Devon started getting to his feet.

"I heard something else," said Goodman.

"And what might that be?"

Goodman looked at Devon venomously. "I heard something about a friend of ours who is not here."

Esau cooperated. "Oh? A brother I might know?"

"No doubt. Do you remember Devon? Devon the foundling? Devon the questioning fool?"

Esau nodded. "The troublemaker..."

Devon stepped between them. "What was it you heard?"

"Only a short time ago I was sweeping up the hall in the Place of Worship," said Goodman, taking a pace to the left so as to look at Esau directly. Goodman periodically performed volunteer deacon labor for the Elders. He was occasionally referred to behind his back by the more outspoken citizens of Cypress Corners as "Young Micah." The Elder Micah had no natural son.

"Yes?" said Esau. He thrust his face close to Devon's. "Yes?"

"I heard the words of Elder Micah as he spoke among his fellows." Goodman paused for effect. "I doubt that brother Devon will dwell much longer among us here."

"I already guessed at that," said Devon.

"More, I don't think Devon will long live to haunt our hills."

"What do you mean?" Said Devon.

Young Goodman chuckled darkly.

"You boys!"

Esau and Goodman turned guiltily. Considering his bulk, Elder Jubal moved surprisingly quickly across the street toward them. "Why

dost thou idle here in the thoroughfare? Have not ye tasks to accomplish?" Jubal's accusatory stare traversed from one to the other, skipping over Devon as though the latter were hidden by a sty upon the eye of the Elder.

"Aye, Elder," Essau muttered. Young Goodman nodded assent. Eyes averted, the two young men hurried away.

Elder Jubal tarried briefly. He rhetorically addressed the warm air of the street: "He that is casteth out of the sight of all must not aggravate the good intentions of others." Jubal cleared his throat self-consciously, turned on his heel, and strode away.

"What?" said Devon toward the retreating figure.

There was no answer.

NINE

The cellar door set against the rear of the Place of Worship was an inclined plane of dark metal, a meter and a half across. Hinged along the top edge, it was secured at the bottom by a combination lock. Only three sides of the sun were visible above the horizon when Devon cautiously crept near to the rear of the holy building.

He carried the flat metal rod the small boy had used earlier to roll the hoop. The closely spaced cypress made an effective screen. Devon wedged the end of the rod into the crack below the combination lock and exerted his weight downward. Just as the pry rod began to bend, the lock snapped open with a flat *crack*. Devon looked around guiltily, but no voice was raised in question, no Elder appeared around the corner of the building. Still carrying the rod in one hand, Devon lifted the door and stepped quickly down into the darkness.

Light filtered dimly into the basement from shallow window-wells at either end. Devon paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust. Impedimenta choked the basement: storage pods, stacks of unused pews, boxes of virgin hymnals.

At the far end of the room, a dusty staircase led to the upper floor. Devon climbed the steps carefully; one of the boards creaked and he stopped. Overhead the plank flooring squeaked as one or more persons moved about. No one approached the trapdoor at the top of the stairs. Devon cautiously continued.

He could hear voices, but the words were muffled by the intervening ceiling and floor. Devon set the pry bar carefully down on the top step. Then he slowly raised the trapdoor a few centimeters and peered out through the crack.

The Creator's machine was visible, projecting out of the surface of the lectern. Elder Micah, his back to the trapdoor, attended the machine. A second man in funereal garb—Elder Jubal—emerged from beyond the platform.

Micah punched the same key that had been triggered when the decree against Devon was given. The machine spoke: "Gene pool orders original mating selection without variance. New factor, coded: Devon, unsuitable. Balance maintained. Answerrrr—"

Micah gave the device a quick, sharp blow with the side of his hand.

"—werrrr." *Click*. "Answer: none."

"Damnable thing," said Micah. "Pray that this device will endure. We have not the knowledge to repair it." He pushed another control and an oblong plastic object, the length of the Elder's thumb, popped out of the Creator's machine. Micah held it for a moment

contemplatively. "I suspect the cassette is nearly worn out, as are the others. It must last for one final service."

Jubal said, "How will you do this?"

"His final disposition?" said Micah. "Apparently shaming him before the congregation will not set him on the path of righteousness. We come to final moments with Devon."

"Too many questions."

"Aye, there are problems enough without his questions. If one asks, then, inevitably, others will too. Thus is born chaos." Micah slid the plastic cassette into the slot in the top of the machine. He punched a key and spoke into the grille: "Erase previous voice recording. Record and play back following message only beginning with words, 'My wishes.' Convert voice recording to machine voice. Add appropriate gene pool computer conclusion." Micah paused, clearing his throat slightly. "My wishes have been spurned by the undevout Devon. His presence among the faithful is a blight and a danger. He must be driven out of the lands I have given you, into the hills, nevermore to engage in human congress. This I order in the name of the Creator." Micah pressed a final key. The machine made a few desultory clicks and buzzes.

From his place of concealment, Devon watched with amazement this perversion of religion. Not that he had been particularly pious of late, but this confirmed and even justified all his rebellious noises. *The Creator's machine is manipulable by Micah*, thought Devon. *And Micah is clearly not the Creator. Therefore does it follow that the Creator must be dead? Or perhaps He never existed?* Theology had never been Devon's forte. Yet even he resisted taking the jumbled thoughts too far. On the lectern, the machine made peremptory sounds.

The voice that emerged from the grille was flat and mechanical. Devon recognized it as the voice of the Creator. "Gene pool selection invariant. New factor, coded: Devon, attempting disruption optimum genetic balance. Disruption counter to program. Disruptive factor must, repeat *must*, be eliminated from gene pool. In name of Creator, new factor, coded: Devon must be eliminated. Any means must be employed; any means shall be condoned." The voice clicked off.

Micah and Jubal looked at each other with evident satisfaction.

"It's a shame," said Jubal. "I can almost like the boy, sometimes."

"It is necessary," said Micah, "to ensure the Creator's Work; and the Creator's Work is order."

"The Creator's work," shouted Devon, "is fraud!" He emerged from the basement, banging the trapdoor up and over. Micah and Jubal turned as one.

"*You*," said Micah as Devon charged up the last few stairs. The two old men moved to stop him. Younger, stronger, more determined,

Devon easily thrust them aside and broke for the Creator's machine. With a sacrilegious recklessness he punched the keys at random.

"Stop, boy!" said Micah. "You shall perish in fire for your impiety."

"Better that than the cold hills," said Devon without turning. Elder Jubal grabbed his arm and tried to wrestle him away from the machine. Devon batted distractedly at the old man, forgetting that he still held the metal pry. The rod slapped across the Elder's face and Jubal fell away, blood spurting from his nose.

"Now see what you've done," said Micah. The Elder grappled with Devon, winding his long arms about the younger man's shoulders and chest. He clung to Devon's back as though he were a saddle.

Devon ignored the old man. He slapped the Creator's machine again and suddenly the cassette popped out. Devon grabbed the plastic cartridge and turned toward the door. Micah tried to stop him, even though he was sliding down Devon's body toward the floor. His bony arms wound around Devon's ankles like vines. Devon stumbled and nearly fell, then jerked loose and made for the door. Micah sprawled forward full-length on the planking.

Devon and the cassette disappeared into the wide bar of dusk-light from the doorway and were gone.

Elder Micah slowly raised himself to his knees. He clenched and unclenched his fists in impotent fury.

Young Goodman clattered into the Place of Worship. "What be the matter? I heard cries." Neither Elder answered at first. Goodman looked around the hall. "Elder Micah? Elder Jubal?"

Jubal sat on the floor with his back against the lectern. His hands were clasped over the lower portion of his face. His eyes were glazed. Blood oozed between his fingers and dripped on the floor.

Micah had himself sunk down and now sat supported by the wall. Pain made his sharp features a mask; he pressed his right hand against his chest as though stanching an invisible wound. The Elder finally spoke, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Payment," he said, "shall be exacted."

TEN

The farmstead of Aram was perhaps the finest cultivation in all the world. Aram labored diligently to produce the highest possible yield from the contrasting square fields of wheat and corn, soy and barley. Then there were the alfalfa meadows, and the pastures for sheep, goats, and cattle. A belt of woodlands bordered two sides of the farm; timid deer occasionally ventured here from the hills. A stream, fed by springs in the hills, meandered across Aram's land until it emptied into the lake, Perseverance.

Eventually the farm would pass from Aram's stewardship because he had no son. The land would ordinarily have been given over to Garth, as prospective senior son-in-law, save that Garth was apparently set to become the new metalsmith. Presumably that meant that rights to use the land would eventually fall to whatever man married Aram's youngest daughter, Ruth. It was a theological mystery among his neighbors how Aram could be cursed with two daughters. The Creator's ways were sometimes obscure.

It was after dark when Devon trudged up the road to Aram's house. The insects had begun their night-sounds. Dog, the unnamed dog, did not bark; he recognized Devon. He rushed up, tail slashing the air violently, and Devon hunkered down for a moment to rumple his ears. Together they approached the house, Dog dancing in happy circles.

Devon paused in the darkness a few meters from the porch. He took the plastic cassette from his pocket; it reflected glints of light from the kitchen windows. A long moment of hesitation: *Now*, he thought. *It must be now.*

Four steps up to the porch and four more across to the screen door. He knocked and there was no response. He knocked again and saw shapes move beyond the print curtain. Old Rachel answered the door. She saw Devon waiting in the sliver of light from the ajar door and said without looking away from him, "Aram!"

Aram's face appeared beside hers and stared silently at Devon. A voice Devon recognized as Rachel's said from inside, "Who is it?"

Her father half-turned. "No one, daughter. Do not bestir thyself."

Devon raised his voice: "Rachel! It's me. This is important."

Aram started to close the door. Devon expediently put his booted foot in the gap. "Wait. I've got something to show all of you."

"Devon?" Rachel looked over her mother's shoulder.

Aram took a step backward and moved protectively in front of his wife and older daughter. "No one is there; not even a spirit of the night."

Devon took advantage of the moment to swing the door completely

open. He stepped inside the house. Ignoring Aram and Old Rachel, he held up the cassette. "I caught him, Rachel. I caught Elder Micah telling the Creator's machine what to say."

Ruth started to clamber down the ladder from the loft. Her father stopped her with a gesture of his arm. "It's nothing, girl. Go back to bed." He reverted to the jargon of the Elders. "Get thee gone, Devon. Go now before thou art done a harm. I mean thee no ill, boy, but there will be no blaspheming here."

Still ignoring him, Devon continued talking to Rachel. "Rachel, listen to me! The machine isn't what the Elders say it is. I think it's broken. I don't know how long it's been broken, but it was Elder Micah who said you had to mate with Garth, not the Creator! Look: I have it all here on this thing from the machine.... The voice is *here*." Old Rachel said with horror. "Thee took from the machine of the Creator?"

Aram snatched the cassette from his hand. "The holy relic! Thee stole—"

Devon said relentlessly, "Rachel, please! Listen to me. What I'm telling you is that we can be together.... I fought with Micah and Jubal.... They tried to hide this... to stop me... to kill me..."

"Thee smote the Elders?" said Aram.

"Devon..." An expression he couldn't decipher flickered across Rachel's face.

"We've got to let everyone know, Rachel. We've all been duped, used, lied to. Only the Creator knows for how long... maybe hundreds of cycles..."

Aram lunged to the side of the kitchen and picked up the ax leaning against the firewood bin. He hefted it menacingly as he came toward Devon. "Get away, Devon. Go now or thee will suffer harm." The keenly honed edge of the ax head glittered in the lamplight.

Devon stepped backward onto the porch. Helplessly, he said to Rachel, "Come with me... please..."

For a moment, only a moment, she started to take a step toward him. Her parents saw it instantly; old Rachel tightly held her arm; Aram stepped in front of her and gestured with the ax. Ruth watched wide-eyed from the top rungs of the ladder.

Rachel spoke and Devon heard anguish in her voice. "I am my father's and my mother's daughter. I will do what I must. Go, Devon. Please go quickly..."

Aram advanced a step. Devon backed away from the ax. He gestured at the cassette gripped in Aram's free hand. "Won't you believe me? *That* is the voice of the Creator. I watched Micah, listened to him as he created it."

"My last warning, boy," said Aram. "Perhaps thou fearest me not,

but others will be coming soon if thou, as thy say, have attacked the Elders. Thou art a heretic and an idolater. They will confine thee or worse."

"The hills..." said Rachel, her voice strained. "Hide there."

"I'll be back for you," said Devon. "We can't live like this; we have to fight them." Hopelessly, he started to turn toward the edge of the porch.

Rachel tried to pull away from her mother's restraining hand. "Devon, I love you—"

Aram slammed the door.

Old William the metalsmith had long since departed for home and his evening meal. The moon was clearly framed in the eastern sky as Garth cleaned up the remnants of his day's labors. He turned as the door to the smithy flew open.

"What do you want?" Garth's voice was as flat and hard as a tempered blade.

Young Goodman's teeth gleamed in a feral smile. "Elder Micah has sent me. The Elders demand your presence and aid."

Garth turned to arrange tools in the rack above the bench. "For what reason?"

"Your friend," said Goodman. He underscored the second word with irony. "Curious Devon."

"What are you talking about?"

Goodman said with satisfaction, "Devon has proved himself demon-possessed. He has defied the Elders and stolen a holy relic from the Place of Worship. He has also attacked and injured two Elders."

Garth realized his mouth was open and consciously shut it. "I cannot believe that."

Goodman extended his animal smile. "You may believe that Elder Micah has called together a group of men to seek Devon out and restrain him."

"My work is not yet finished." He turned away and resumed placing the tongs and hammers.

"It is a direct order of the Council."

Without looking at him, Garth said heavily. "Then it is my duty to obey."

"Then make haste," said Goodman. "Micah believes Devon is making for the hills. Once there, he'll be difficult and dangerous to root out."

"As dangerous as a mountain cat?"

Goodman's face went pale. Anger constricted his words. "If you ever—" He did not complete the threat.

"I might." Garth shoved contemptuously past him and out into the

night.

ELEVEN

The six-sided moon shed a cold glow from the east as Devon fled toward the hills. The underbrush tore painful cat-scratches in his flesh as he climbed across gullies. Territory that was familiar during the day, now, by night, became an alien landscape. Devon took a shortcut through a narrow peninsula of woods. In the sudden darkness, a night bird screamed and he began to run. A tangle of fallen limbs caught him just below the knees. Devon pitched headlong into the strewn dead leaves.

He lay stationary for a few minutes, letting the panic subside and catching his breath. The leaves crackled with the rhythm of his expanding and contracting ribcage. He twisted his head so that his nose was no longer buried in their bitter scent. The knotted pain below his ribs began to subside.

When he heard the distant sounds of the mob, he knew it was time to continue. Devon got to his feet and went forward, feeling his way between the trees. Behind him, the moon showed itself only intermittently through the forks and branches of the interlocking crowns. To his right, an owl hooted, the sound still louder than the shouts of Devon's pursuers.

Devon burst free of the sheltering trees and found himself on the verge of a broad meadow. Then he saw the telltale flicker of torches on the far side; they were between the hills and him. While he had rested in the woods, a portion of the mob had evidently raced ahead in a pincers movement to cut him off from the hills.

He turned back, but the rest of the torches were still behind him. He saw the winking lights distantly, among the trees. Devon retreated to the edge of the woods; the woods would give him his only chance at a hiding place.

The searchers wended their way around the treetrunks of the grove; these woods had not been cleared in cycles. Devon could hear voices now, though he could not make out individual words. He heard the tramping of heavy boots through the dry leaves, the sounds of branches being ripped aside. Turning, he saw that the other group had nearly crossed the meadow toward him.

Devon dove into a thicket of tangled briars, rolling to escape most of the thorns. He burrowed into the fallen leaves, heaping them over his legs and body. As he completed his makeshift shelter, a breeze-eddy whirled up hundreds of leaves and scattered them over Devon's briar thicket.

Is the Creator helping me? he wondered. If there *were* a Creator. At this point, Devon felt sure about nothing.

As he lay supine, he felt something sharp and hard pressing against the small of his back. Thinking it perhaps a rock, Devon started to scabble silently behind himself at the protuberance. Then he saw the flicker of torches beyond the translucent leaves covering his eyes and he froze.

The sounds of branches bent and broken, the crackle of crushing leaves were all around him. He heard a voice he was sure belonged to Elder Micah.

“Well, Young Goodman, did you see anything on the meadow?”

A negative response.

“And what about you? No? And you?”

Indistinguishable mutters.

“Perhaps the other party didn’t outflank him.” Garth’s voice. “Maybe he made it to the hills.”

“He didn’t have much start.” Aram. “He left my home only minutes before you arrived.”

A voice Devon did not recognize. “He caused no harm to your family?”

Aram again. “Only by frightening them. He’s a madman.”

Devon smiled slightly. There would be no public admission of Rachel’s wavering.

“We had best be moving on,” said a voice. “If he’s ahead of us now, he will be increasing his lead.”

“We will find him,” said Micah. Mutters of agreement. “Even if we must search the entire world.”

The sounds of sod-booted feet crashing through the undergrowth toward the periphery of the meadow. Torchlight replaced by steady darkness. Micah’s voice, diminished with distance: “We shall divide into smaller parties. Elders shall decide.” Other voices, calling out names.

Slowly and cautiously, Devon began to clear the leaves away from himself. Then he turned over and stared at something bright metal. He brushed away more leaves; more metal gleamed in the dim, filtered moonlight. Devon cleared a wider circle and paused, fascinated. There was a metal plate set into the floor of the forest. He brushed more debris away from the plate, oblivious to the bramble thorn ripping at his clothing. Finally he realized he was looking at a disc, roughly two and a half meters in diameter. At one edge was the protuberance that had dug so painfully into his back; it was a tiny dome, the surface of which was composed of triangular panels.

Devon touched the dome and let his fingers rest there for several seconds. There was a click from inside the cold metal and the dome opened like the two halves of a shellfish. Devon saw within a smooth panel glowing red. It was triangular also, roughly about the size and

area of his palm. Not knowing precisely why he did so, Devon brought his fingers down onto the panel. Resilient, almost like flesh, it was neither warm nor cold. Another click. The panel turned bright green. Suddenly alarmed, Devon took his hand away. But whatever process he had started could not be stopped.

A bell chimed softly, incongruous in this forest thicket. A black dot appeared precisely in the center of the disc.

And then the metal opened.

To Devon it resembled the petals of a flower opening. Metal segments drew aside and away, iris-ing apart. The unseen bell chimed again. The panel beside Devon's hand continued to pulse a brilliant, glowing green. Devon looked down into utter blackness and it seemed to him to be the darkest, deepest hole he had ever seen.

Micah and the others stood staring at the sheer rock face looming above them. Some of the searchers thrust their torches close to the stone, looking for footholds. They found none.

"Even if he was a mountain goat he couldn't have climbed this," said Garth.

"It wouldn't stop him if he were a demon," somebody said.

"Devon is no demon," said Micah. His eyes were deep-set and invisible in the wavering shadows cast by torchlight. "He is but flesh and blood. He could not have escaped by this route."

"Perhaps he doubled back and sought an entrance to the hills further down."

Again Micah shook his head. "We would have seen him. This canyon funnels only to here."

Aram said. "Then somehow we have overlooked him in the meadows or woods."

Micah nodded. "That must be it. We shall retrace our steps. He may still be hiding, driven to earth like a beast of the hills."

"The groves," said Aram. "I'll wager he's hiding up above our heads where we never thought to look."

"Thus we shall trap him," said Micah.

The men started back toward lower ground.

What manner of hole could this be?

Devon circled the open iris cautiously. Although the depth beneath was impenetrably dark, he had the feeling he was standing on the brink of an impossible abyss. Devon felt an indefinable sensation of *distance*; distances on a dimension that could not and did not exist here in Cypress Corners. He had experienced those distances, traveled them somewhere, sometime... When? He suddenly remembered and staggered back from the iris.

The dreams, his strange, unexplainable dreams. In them he had been transported inconceivable distances and had seen the alien, unblinking lights in the sky.

He had fallen down an endless tunnel.... But nothing in Cypress Corners was endless!

Devon stared down at the hole in the world and felt panic. *Endlessly tumbling...* Then he remembered who he was and where he was, and broke out of his reverie. The fear was still there, but it no longer paralyzed.

Leaning forward, he dropped a twig over the blackness. Rather than falling into the hole, the twig bounced against a barrier more transparent than window-plastic and then slid off to the side. Devon tried a handful of dead leaves. The leaves fluttered down until they were level with the surrounding earth; then they too gently slid off to the side. Devon gingerly started to put his toe into the hole, as though testing the temperature of a spring-fed lake. Fear had been replaced by something more insidious—curiosity.

The sounds of the searchers interrupted him. Absorbed in the mystery of the iris, he had failed to notice the approach of Micah and the others.

“... every tree,” said a still-distant voice.

Devon turned to flee—and tripped over the dome and the glowing mechanism inside. He started to cry out, then choked off the yell. Wildly flailing his arms, he toppled forward into the iris. The darkness rushed up sickeningly. He barely caught himself, his hands catching an unstable, slippery grip on the opposite rim of the iris. For a few seconds he hung there, spreadeagled across the emptiness, trying to keep himself aboveground by pressure of feet and hands against the outer rim.

Devon exerted his entire strength trying to keep himself from falling. He heard his muscles crack; then he heard something else—a strange, keening whine that made his teeth ache as it rapidly climbed up through the scale.

He heard the bell chime a third time. A pale blue light began to wash up from beneath him in the hole. The light was strong enough that Devon could see his hands gripping the rim of the iris—could see the flesh, and then the muscles and ligaments, and finally the bones as though his flesh were like glass. The whine cycled higher, drowning out even the sounds of the mob, the wind, the crickets, the night birds.

A great rushing wind sucked at Devon. He struggled as his fingers were torn loose from their purchase. *O Creator, don't suck me down to hell...* Then the wind pulled him down into the open iris.

Devon had time for one long shuddering scream.

He vanished into the shaft and only the pale blue light was left. The wail cycled back down the scale toward the bass. The iris slid smoothly shut, as did the small dome enclosing the control. The panel within blinked back to red.

Leaves, twigs, and dust settled back on the two-and-a-half meter disc and adhered as though magnetized. As the air stabilized, the branches of the surrounding trees stopped moving. Again the briar thicket was quiet. Once more the iris was effectively invisible.

They heard the wail as they crossed the meadow toward the trees. Those in front halted; those in the rear hurried to catch up. They huddled in a tight knot.

"The Creator's balls!" said Young Goodman. "What is it?"

"Do not blaspheme His name," said Micah grimly.

Aram said, "It sounds like the keening of some great beast in pain."

"There is no beast so large," said someone else.

The sound began to diminish. "Let us go," said Micah.

"Into those woods?" Young Essau stared at him in disbelief.

"Yes," said Micah. "Into those woods."

"But there's something *in* there."

"Devon the blasphemer is in there."

Essau looked doubtful. "He didn't make those sounds."

"We are going into that grove," said Micah flatly. He walked away from his followers. After a dozen paces he turned and looked back at them. "Who follows me?" he said. "Who will do the Creator's work?"

They exchanged looks among them. There was some mumbling.

"I'll come," said Garth.

"And I," said Aram.

The rest followed.

They found little remarkable in the grove. They bumped around the thicket, torches at the ends of extended arms, squinting up into the branches.

"No one there!"

"Or there!"

Their voices drifted back and forth across the woods. Most of the brush was trampled into the forest floor. Young Esau stumbled over the latch mechanism of the iris and fell. His fellows helped him up and stamped out the fire his torch had started in the dead leaves.

"Damned forest," he said. "We ought to burn the whole thing out."

"Cease thy profanity," said Aram stiffly.

When they had determined that Devon wasn't hiding in the branches of the trees, they all gathered in the next meadow. Grinding his teeth unpleasantly, Elder Micah glared around the circle. "We will search every squirrel's refuge, every rabbit warren between here and

the town.” He led the way with his torch.

As the crowd straggled off across the meadow, Garth quietly slipped a thin metal pry rod under his shirt. He had found it in the leaves beside the briar thicket in the grove. He looked back at the dark trees and wondered where Devon was. Wherever his friend was, Garth silently wished him luck.

TWELVE

He plummeted down a hole with no bottom.

“*Rachel!*” The scream was torn out of Devon’s lungs by the rushing wind and died echoing along the interior of the tunnel. Tunnel. His mind fastened on the word, clung to it as an anchor, somehow knowing this was a tunnel and not merely an impossibly deep hole into which he had plunged. His initial panic began to abate.

Devon’s body slowly tumbled end for end as the wind whipped past. He had a rotating view of metal walls on every side, all illuminated by the ever-present blue light.

At first he had squeezed his eyes tightly shut; but when he did not smash in a few seconds into the hard-packed earthen bottom of some well, he had opened them again. He felt a wave of nausea. His overtaxed inner ear messaged his brain that he was *falling*. Devon again shut his eyes, but that was worse, so he opened them and coexisted with the queasiness.

It was hard to tell exactly with the blue light, but he guessed that the hole had broadened into a tube about two hundred meters across. There were features on the walls, and it was that zooming past and receding into the distance which gave him the sense of immense speed: pipes, nodes, cross-tunnel entrances, unidentifiable machinery. The walls themselves looked like metal sky-stuff.

Devon discovered that he could use his hands in the air as steering vanes to stop his tumbling. He experimented until he achieved a nearly stable attitude in the air—that helped diminish the nausea in the pit of his stomach. He examined his surroundings with keener interest.

He was sure he had traveled for a number of minutes. Considering his apparent speed, that meant he had covered an inconceivable distance. Where could a tube such as this fit inside Cypress Corners?

He was whirled around a wide bend in the tunnel. The diameter had narrowed again until the walls were only a few meters away. He hurtled down the precise center of the tube so that he could not reach any handhold or other protrusion on the tunnel wall, even had he wished.

Another bend in the tube. Centrifugal force clutched him for a moment. He was no more able to help himself than a bit of flotsam caught in an undertow.

Then he saw the wall dead ahead and “remembered” again he was falling. The metal surface came up impossibly fast; Devon struggled to turn himself, to thrust out his hands, do *something* to keep from smashing into the metal wall.

He realized he was slowing. The gradual deceleration continued until Devon floated, dreamlike, toward the metal bulkhead of the tube. At last he was gently deposited, feet-first, on the bulkhead itself.

Devon straightened his legs and suddenly he was floating off the metal and toward the opposite side of the tube. Instinctively he grabbed a handhold. The nausea returned, though not so badly as before; he *felt* like he was still falling, though he could plainly see it was not so.

After a minute he felt steadier and decided to experiment. He let go the U-shaped handhold and tried to push himself back to the bulkhead. Somehow he didn't travel in quite the right direction. He fumbled, trying clumsily to right himself, turned over again and again. He slowly drifted within arm's range of another handhold.

This time when he kicked off from the bulkhead, he traveled in a fairly straight line. He stopped his flight by smartly catching an angled pipe on the other side of the tube. Then back to the bulkhead. He laughed and said aloud, "I can fly!" *Like in the dreams*, he thought. It *had* been something like the flights in his dreams; that sobered him.

He considered the thought, hanging there in midair with one hand gripping a hold, until his attention was caught by a light to the left and below him on the bulkhead. Devon carefully pulled himself from handhold to handhold. The light bracketed an iris which seemed to be about half the diameter of the one Devon had encountered in the briar thicket. To the side, white letters glowed on a panel:

ACCESS TUBE
SERVICE MODULE

Below the legend, another panel glowed crimson.

Devon reached out and touched the second panel; it instantly flickered to green and the iris dilated open. Head-first, as though swimming into a narrow cave, Devon pushed through. Once past the rim of the iris, his eyes were dazzled by a flash of orange light—and once again he possessed weight. Instinctively he thrust out his arms in front of him as he crashed into a hard surface. His shoulder took the brunt of the blow and he rolled. Devon found himself flat on his back, looking up as the iris contracted to a black dot and then became a featureless disc of metal.

He sat up, rubbing his shoulder. The first thing he discovered was that his weight remained. No flying here. The floor beneath him was a seamless surface of blue-gray metal. The arched ceiling was about three meters above. The room itself was about half the size of the outer chamber of the Place of Worship, perhaps seven or eight meters on a side. One wall was completely taken up by a console covered with dials and controls.

Devon turned to see what was in back of him and recoiled, at first thinking he was confronting a live creature. Then he grinned self-consciously, realizing he was looking at a plastic case containing a transparent suit of clothes in the shape of a human being. The garment was empty, but hung open with a strip of twin blue lines down the front. There were snakes in the hills, and Devon had seen them. This costume looked as though a human being had shed its skin without a break in the material, save for that open gash along the front.

Above the skin-suit, held securely by tension-clamps, was a teardrop-shaped helmet with tubes protruding from one side. The helmet was as transparent as the suit below.

A panel glowed beside the plastic case. The letters spelled out:

SUITING INSTRUCTIONS

The usual lighted crimson plate was set below the printed legend.

Devon got to his feet and walked around the chamber. He touched the walls; they were warm. He returned to the plastic case and marveled at the human snake-suit within. Curious, he reached out and touched the front panel of the case; under his fingers, the panel slid up with a soft hiss. A voice said. "Model J-10 oxygen suit. Suiting—"

He involuntarily stepped back and the voice stopped. The transparent panel hissed down again. Devon continued his explorations. A few meters down from the plastic case was a two-and-a-half meter circle incised in the metal wall. It reminded Devon of the iris, save that this disc was secured with massive hinges. If it were indeed a door, it apparently was set to open inward. Connected to the hinges were apparatus incorporating tubes, cylinders, and angled arms. Another phrase glowed in block letters across the disc:

VIEWPORT 874

There were several smaller panels below the letters. Devon pressed the crimson square marked "Open." He heard two clicks, but nothing more happened. The panel remained red instead of turning, as Devon had come to expect of these cooperative squares, to green. He pressed again; and again heard a pair of clicks from within the disc. He punched the next panel, which was labeled "Override." This time the panel turned green.

Devon stepped back as the machinery activated within Viewport 874. Slowly, ponderously, the massive disc began to swing open toward him. As a crack visibly opened at the jamb, Devon heard a sudden, sharp hiss.

The air began to thunder out of the chamber, sluicing past him like

the worst windstorm he had ever experienced. A suction, stronger than the one that had pulled him through the iris and into the tube, drew him inexorably toward the crack between hatch and bulkhead. The hatch abruptly stopped opening; in the distance, Devon heard the clang of alarm bells. The suction held him tightly against the crack, which was scarcely wider than the one through which he had peeked in the Place of Worship.

The hatch began to cycle closed in perfect silence. As the crack narrowed, Devon had one quick look at—something. He wasn't quite sure what. He could see a jagged, shard-edged opening as though a bird had flown through a wide window. But beyond that—there was something he could not describe, yet he knew he had seen it before. Where?

And then the hatch was shut, and Devon staggered backward away from Viewport 874, except that now a new panel flashed on and off:

DEPRESSURIZED

To Devon it blinked in increasingly slower pulses. His arms flailed as he tried to keep his balance. His mind was detached, watching his arms windmill in slow motion. *What is happening?* he thought. The words endlessly repeated themselves in his brain as he fell

and fell

and fell

and hit the floor, bounced once, and lay still.

DEPRESSURIZED

continued to pulse on and off and it was the last thing he remembered. The crimson muted swiftly to black.

THIRTEEN

The dream.

He replayed it in an endless loop: First the night through the tube and the arrival at the access chamber and the skin-suit in the case and Viewport 874 and then the endlessly pulsing “Depressurized.” And then the other dream, the old one, the dream that carried him afar from where he slept on the hills above Cypress Corners.

He saw the strange, steady stars burning upon their infinitely dark backdrop. They surrounded him, blazing closer and closer until they burned beyond his eyes, into his brain.

They burned in both dreams.

Devon awoke convulsing upon the warm floor of the access chamber. His arms were crossed, both hands upon his throat. His lungs ached as though seared. He took his hands away from his throat and rolled onto his side. For a while he lay there, thinking of nothing else but drinking the air he had been denied.

Finally he pulled himself up on elbows to a semi-sitting position. He blinked rapidly, orienting himself to where he was. Then his eyes widened as he saw it all again.

Both dreams... the stars that did not blink. The same dream. One.

Devon clawed himself upright, hanging onto the console for support. He faced Viewport 874, wondering if he dared press the “Override” panel. Whatever it was that lay beyond, he wanted to see it again. It was more than a wish; he felt a thirst, an inarguable lust. As Devon staggered toward the hatch, he heard a subdued but imperative mechanical voice:

“Entrance to depressurized section refused. Protective lock has been placed on this port. Contact maintenance unit, terminal code 110-3976.”

Devon stepped back, looking for the source of the voice. Finding none, he moved toward the hatch. Again the warning voice spoke:

“Entrance to depressurized section forbidden, repeat *forbidden*. Protective lock ensures no admittance without use of oxygen suit. Maintenance unit advisement urged, terminal code 110-3976. This means you.”

Something caught his eye and he turned his head. The light panel beside the plastic case with the suit pulsed on and off. Still in the distance, alarm bells jangled; a vibration almost felt rather than heard. In the light panel the words SUITING INSTRUCTIONS now alternately pulsed with SUIT UP BEFORE ENTERING.

Devon looked at the case with more care. He reached out, touched the slick surface, and the front panel slid up. Carefully he took the

transparent suit off its hanger and started to pull it from the case. The SUITING INSTRUCTIONS plate began to speak:

“Model J-10 oxygen suit. Suiting instructions. One: remove all sharp protrusions from your person.”

Devon awkwardly fumbled around himself, searching for sharp protrusions. He winced at a jagged pain from his bruised shoulder. The warning voice continued:

“Insert feet into legs of the suit.”

As Devon put one leg into the suit, he wondered momentarily if he should remove his sod-boots. But the fabric of the suit seemed to expand to allow him to put his foot down into the suit leg. The foot of the suit conformed perfectly to the size and shape of his boot. Devon inserted his other leg.

The warning voice said, “Make certain no wrinkles exist as you pull the suit up around your body.”

Devon did so.

“Insert arms carefully. The suit will not rip but caution should be exercised to avoid wrinkling or bunching under the arms.”

He adjusted the suit around his shoulders gingerly. There were no wrinkles or bunches under his arms.

“Make certain your fingers reach the ends of the glove hands.”

Devon clenched his fists, discovering that the suit fabric did not at all constrict the joints of his fingers. He brought one hand up to his eyes. The fabric was virtually invisible.

“Smooth suit down across your shoulders,” continued the warning voice. “Using a similar smooth motion, seal the bluestrips for an airtight closure.”

Those would be the twin strips running along the suit’s frontal opening. Devon followed instructions; the bluestrips seemed to fuse together with no trace of a seam.

“Remove the helmet from its berth. Place the ends of the oxygen hoses into their sockets on the shoulders of the suit. Red into red, yellow into yellow. Now raise the helmet, set it onto the gasket seal, over your head, and give it a half-turn clockwise to lock.”

Devon turned the helmet one way, with no result, and then the other. It snapped into place with a solid *snick*. He began to panic as he realized he was completely sealed in. Then he heard a faint hiss; he drew air deep into his lungs.

The warning voice said, “Place left hand against the light plate and if you are properly sealed, pressure will be equalized in this access chamber. Thank you.”

The light panel on Viewport 874 began to blink imperatively. Devon brought up his left hand and touched the “Open” plate. This time the crimson square flashed to green immediately. The hatch began to

cycle; through the helmet, Devon heard a louder hiss of escaping air.

He could feel his heart beating ever faster, as though it might pound a hole out through his chest. Devon willed himself to relax. He noticed that with each breath, the flexible material of the helmet indented slightly.

The light panel signaled:

PRESSURE EQUALIZED
ADMITTANCE PERMITTED

He was deafened by the sound of his own breathing. Devon could hear nothing from outside the suit as the hatch slowly cycled open. He moved to the side so as to watch the fissure between hatch and bulkhead gradually widen. When there was space enough, he stepped through.

At first all he saw was the room. The new chamber was huge, even larger than the main hall in the Place of Worship. This room took the form of a dome at least one hundred meters across. Devon crossed the threshold and his feet rose from the floor; again he was without weight. *What had the teacher Old Silas called it? Gravity. That mysterious command of the Creator which kept the directions “up” and “down” distinct.*

He grabbed at the wall and found a smooth railing that had evidently been placed there for exactly that purpose. Devon hung suspended, surveying the chamber. He had to momentarily reorient himself. “Up” had now rotated ninety degrees. The hatch of the access chamber was part of the floor of Viewport 874. And the viewport chamber itself had been ruined.

Devon raised his eyes and drew in a deep breath. Staring, he murmured a prayer to the Creator.

It was all there.

As he had remembered it from the dreams.

He looked upon what lay before him; then passed within a hair of unconsciously and automatically making the decision to turn, retreat through the lockport, and hide screaming, limbs tucked into an instinctual ball. More than looked—he gaped, knowing instantly how futile his own knowledge was to explain everything he saw.

Devon felt like the savages in the Story of Enos from the Book; the benighted men of the wilderness who had never seen a horse, never seen a tree.

The chamber was littered with broken furniture and cratered, pitted consoles’. Faint lights glowed in wall mountings. Overhead yawned the remnant of what had been a great transparent dome. About a third of the hemisphere had been torn away in some ancient cataclysm. The opening was framed among jagged projections as sharp-pointed as

serpent fangs. The dim interior lights reflected glints from the sharded edges. The dome's ragged opening was flared outward as though from an explosion within.

What could cause such force? But the thought fled and was forgotten as Devon looked to the alien sky.

Beyond the ruined bubble hung the unwinking stars of his dream. They had not changed from the brief impression he'd glimpsed during the abortive first attempt with the viewport hatch. Neither had they changed from his visions.

Why do they not blink? he asked himself. Are they stars like those in the sky? He recoiled from a nightmare thought: Could they be the savage animals' eyes Rachel saw in the dark?

Devon forced himself to move hand-over-hand along the rail and across the floor of the chamber to the periphery of the dome. He discovered a network of thin, flexible lines crosshatching the near side of the bubble itself. He had *been* here, had *seen* all this; and not merely in the initial peek past the viewport hatch. *Old Silas would have called it a sense of déjà vu, the feeling of having traveled here before, but knowing I couldn't have.*

Of course he could not have seen this place before, but he failed to convince himself.

Was it not somehow blasphemous to be trespassing on a private preserve of the Creator? Though he immediately discarded the thought, Devon hesitated. Then he kicked away from the edge of the dome and sailed toward the ragged hole. As he neared the shattered edges of the opening, Devon grabbed one of the snapped safety lines drifting free.

His fingers clenched convulsively on the line. It had suddenly occurred to him that this dome signified a clear demarcation between the *inside* and a larger *outside*. Should he drift beyond the hole in the bubble, he might not find a purchase enabling him to return inside. *Inside!*

Inside is within Cypress Corners. There is no outside! He fought back that particular demon while broken safety lines moved around him like loy snakes.

Delicately tethered, he hung in the center of the jagged break until his breathing again became a regular rhythm. But more importantly, he realized, he could again *think*. All across his new black sky the lights were suspended, flat and changeless: eyes of white, yellow, blue, orange, red. *Truly stars?* He stared and picked out what appeared to be several luminous clouds, light as milkweed pollen.

Transfixed by the wonder of it, he floated there for minutes, then hours, days...

... and returned to awareness of his own body only when that flesh collided uncomfortably with one of the broken spears of transparent

dome.

Devon reluctantly lowered his eyes from the stars. There was even more, he saw...

Again, the *deja vu*:

... had never seen anything so huge. Even the hills themselves and all the fields and Cypress Corners itself, all were dwarfed to insignificance by this thing. Shapes and lines and structures dwindled away in a perspective Devon's eyes had never before attempted to encompass. He stared with incomprehension as his motion continued and this thing began itself to shrink, diminishing with distance until it was even less than the other lights spangling the blackness.

Then Devon felt there was nothing to touch, nothing on which to stand. Nothing, ever again....

He found it was easier to trace a little at a time than to fill his entire field of vision with what lay below. The bubble in which he floated was a mere node on the outside of a tube; the tube was a stalk between two huge domes; the domes were bulbs on a greater cluster of spheres; the cluster was only one of many more. The line of spheres below Devon seemed to stretch away to infinity; yet an infinity paradoxically not so large as the infinity above which held the stars.

How can this world be? Is it the world? Could it be hell? he thought, instantly denying the idea as he thought it.

Devon followed with his eyes the network of tubes leading away through vast, kilometers-wide spaces toward the other spheres of sky-stuff. The heretical thought finally forced itself to the surface: *Could Cypress Corners be out there somewhere? In one of those domes? Is this what lies beyond the sky?*

The questions would not stop flowing; just as the universe would not stop pouring into his eyes. Finally he screwed his eyes tightly shut, screaming, "Stop it! Stop it!"

When at last he opened them again, Devon saw his face in a distorted reflection on the inside of the helmet. Tears gleamed in starlight.

FOURTEEN

Finally it was Devon's body that drew him away from the universe. There came a time when he could drink no more energy from the stars. Tired, thirsty, hungry, his shoulder throbbing, bladder aching with pressure, Devon pulled himself back along the safety line to the edge of the ruined dome.

But to which hatch? There were three in a row. The hatch through which he had originally entered the viewport chamber had cycled shut.

Devon pressed the red panel on the hatch nearest him. The metal disc swung away from him easily; there was no outrush of air. Devon grasped the rim of the hatch opening and propelled himself through. He found himself in a narrow tunnel, illuminated by a dim, blue glow. He started to turn around, but the hatch behind him had sealed itself. The "Open" panel glowed red; Devon assumed the door would open if he touched it.

On impulse, he continued along the tunnel. Pipes and conduit lined the walls. Occasionally the smooth surfaces were raw and deformed as though the corridor had at one time been compressed and then wrenched straight again.

A dozen meters farther along, he saw something hanging in the blue gloom. Closer, he realized it was a dead woman lying on her back in mid-tunnel. Her light hair floated out around her head, her mouth was open, her eyes stared. She wore no helmet or protective suit, but was clad in a light blue coverall. A triangular insignia was stitched in the fabric over her right breast.

She was very beautiful. Devon wondered who she was, where had she come from, what had happened to her? He edged past the corpse and pushed off from the bulkhead.

Farther along the tunnel he encountered a broken conduit and great globules of water hanging suspended. They hung like jewels; and then, as Devon sailed through them, they dispersed, shattered against him, clubbed up again. His thirst asserted itself and his hands moved to the juncture of helmet and suit. Then he remembered the dead woman's face and continued resolutely along the passage.

The end of the tunnel brought a console covered with dials and gauges. Beside the console was another circular hatch. The light panel read:

MEMORY BANK TERMINAL 1123-L
ACCESS LOCKPORT

Devon reached to touch the familiar square. Another crimson warning plate flashed on:

EQUALIZE PRESSURE
BEFORE ADMITTANCE

He touched that plate instead. It blinked green and air hissed into the tunnel. The lockport swung open.

Devon remembered his experience with the first lockport; he entered the opening feet-first. He had guessed correctly—gravity in the next chamber had not been cut off. He felt the uncomfortable tug of weight as he dropped beyond the threshold.

He was awed by the room in which he found himself. At least a hundred and fifty meters across, had it been plowed ground it could have provided corn and potatoes for a single family for an entire cycle. The chamber was fitted with clusters of comfortable-appearing chairs, which looked as though they could mold themselves to the form of his body. One wall was lined solely with racks of metal cubes, each cube about half the size of Devon's fist. A blocky instrument, the shape and size of a kitchen table, stood a few meters away. It was made of some translucent substance; Devon saw movement from within, waves of color swirling like oil on water. The top of the device was honeycombed with square depressions.

Devon started toward the racks of cubes, but his bladder reminded him of bodily priorities. He surveyed the chamber again, but there was no private place for proper urination.

He raised his hands to the gasket around his neck; the helmet clicked, easily rotated half a turn, and he lifted it off. He touched the suit at the base of his throat. The bluestrips unsealed, separating just ahead of his finger as he traced a line down the front.

Devon looked for the least conspicuous area of the chamber. Finally he left a yellow puddle in the far corner. At the last moment he had nearly been unable to relieve himself; shamed and sure that here, unlike in the hills of Cypress Corners, someone was watching him. The chamber and its furnishings were immaculately clean. It seemed a virtual sacrilege to foul this sterile place.

Still Devon released a sigh of comfortable relief when the deed was accomplished. He pulled the straps of the coveralls up over his shoulders and crossed to the racked ranks of metal cubes. He selected a cube at random and carried it back to the device with the honeycombed top. The cube was obviously of a shape and size to fit into one of the depressions. Devon inserted it and a voice filled the chamber:

"Erik Satie, AD 1866 to 1925, was commissioned to compose *Mercure, poses plastiques en trois tableaux*, by the fashionable Count Etienne de Beaumont for a series of avant-garde theatrical

performances, Les Soirees de Paris, to be held, in 1924, at the tiny Theatre de la Cigale.”

The words meant nothing. Devon stared bemusedly at the cube machine.

The voice continued, “And now, here is Satie’s *Mercury*.”

The music swelled commandingly through the chamber. Devon staggered back against the wall, thunderstruck. He had never heard music like this before. Cypress Corners had its few hymns, all of which were to be sung without accompaniment. And nearly every child, at one time or another, had been reproved by the Elders for whistling, humming, or tapping a foot in time with some natural rhythm.

He stood there for a while, bathed by the brilliant sounds of what the machine had called “Satie’s *Mercury*.” After a time the music stopped; but it played far longer in Devon’s mind.

The lengthy rows of cubes bore labels indicating sections and sub-sections: PHILOSOPHY, MUSIC, LANGUAGES, BIOCHEMISTRY, RELIGION, FICTION, and one entire row set apart and tagged BASIC HISTORICAL INFORMATION. Devon picked out the first of these and had started to turn back to the cube machine when a lighted panel caught his attention. It flashed the words:

ASK ME FIRST

The chair rested on a carpeted island two meters back from the cube racks. A metal shaft protruded from the floor in front. Roughly even with the face of anyone sitting in the chair, the shaft branched into a hoop a half-meter across. As if objects concrete in themselves, the letters spelling ASK ME FIRST hung in the center of the hoop.

“Ask you what?” said Devon aloud. He placed the metal cube back in its rack and walked toward the chair and hoop. “How should I ask you?” He heard no response.

When he stepped onto the blue carpet skirting the chair, a voice said, “May I help you?” Devon watched as ASK ME FIRST faded and was replaced by what appeared to be the disembodied head of a man. The head floated in mid-hoop. The face was that of a man in his fifties or early sixties; he wore a graying moustache and sparse goatee. He peered toward Devon through thick spectacles, his lips curving in a benign smile. “May I help you?”

Devon stepped backward and the head vanished, to be replaced by ASK ME FIRST. Devon walked forward again. As soon as his foot touched the carpet, the head reappeared and said, “May I help you?”

“Who are you?” said Devon.

“I am the sphere projector. Would you like to sit down and talk?”

Devon settled himself in the chair. The material flexed and molded

itself around his sore muscles. He said with some unsureness, "Are you, uh, just a head?"

The head chuckled. "What you see, sir, is a mere terminal projection."

"There's more to you?"

"Oh, much more, sir. The greater portion of me is spread over some six billions of kilometers of circuitry." Devon paused to consider that. "Billions" was another concept with which he had difficulty. He tried to picture anything—stones, people, apples, *anything*—in the billions and could not. "Are you real or not?" he finally said. "That," said the sphere projector, "depends..." Devon spread his hands to indicate the room. "What is all this?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid I don't grasp the meaning of your question. When you say 'all this,' do you mean the memory bank library, my function, the purpose of life in general, or the specifics of your present situation?"

"Listen," said Devon, "are you alive?"

"Why no, sir. I'm the voice of the library stacks. You might call me the visualization of computer output. I'm here to serve you, to advise you which cubes to use to obtain the data you require."

Devon sat back. "I'm all confused. I've met so many new things...."

"You sound distraught, sir. Why not relax and let me see if I can assist you."

"Thank you," said Devon.

The spherical projector said, "Now. Are you a member of the crew or are you supercargo?"

"I don't know what those mean."

The projection pursed its lips seriously. "Perhaps I should contact a medical section to assist you. You sound as if you may be ill."

"No," said Devon, "I'm all right... I think. I fell down a hole in the ground... well, I didn't exactly fall *down*. I fell *away*, if you know what I mean. I was pulled forward down a very long, hollow thing."

The projection said crisply, "That sounds like a description of a bounce tube, sir. From what biosphere did you say you had come?"

"Biosphere?"

"An enclosed environment for human life."

"I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean," said Devon. "You mean my home? I come from Cypress Corners."

The projection mused. "Cypress Corners? Closed ethnic agrarian community. How did you get here, into the service perimeter of the Ark?"

"The Ark?" Devon repeated.

"I think I know what you need," said the sphere projector. "Do you see the section labeled BASIC HISTORICAL INFORMATION to your

left?"

Devon nodded.

"Do you see the section labeled BASIC HISTORICAL INFORMATION to your left?"

Devon realized that the machine must not be able to see him nod.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I'm sorry. Can't you see me?"

The dark, paternal eyes blinked. "That's quite all right; think nothing of it. My visual receptors at this terminal seem to be inoperative; I'll have to call a repairmech." The machine paused. "Now. Go to that section and remove the cube numbered forty-three. Then take it to the memory bank in the center of the chamber and insert it into one of the empty sockets. I think that may help you orient yourself."

Devon said, "Thank you very much."

The projection smiled benevolently. "You're more than welcome. That's what I'm here for, to help you. If you need any further assistance, don't hesitate to ask."

"Well, there is one other thing."

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm hungry, and I could use a drink."

The face of the sphere projector looked puzzled. "Your question, sir?"

Devon said, "How can I obtain food and drink?"

"Go to the service module at the end of the chamber. Beneath the plate bearing the word 'Refreshment,' punch out your order. Delivery will be effected immediately. *Bon appetit*, sir." The projection frowned. "Wait, sir. Upon consulting inventory, I discover that the foodstocks in this sector of the perimeter have suffered destruction to a point of 96.7 percent unavailability. Stock safely obtainable for human consumption is limited to, flash-frozen survival ration solids and water. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Anything," said Devon. "I'm starving."

"Very well. You may claim a survival packet from the slot in the midsection of the service module."

Devon got up from the chair, though his muscles rebelled at leaving such comfort. As he stepped off the carpeted area the sphere projector's image winked out, leaving the hoop empty.

He identified the service module by the "Refreshment" plate. He found the designated slot and extracted what he presumed to be the survival packet. It consisted of a clear plastic squeeze-bulb of water and a half-kilo cube of a dark brown substance with the consistency of drying mud.

Devon found a chair that seemed functional for nothing but sitting. He sat and examined his meal. The water bulb was simple enough; at

one end a nipple protruded. Devon tentatively nipped off the tip with his teeth. He squeezed water into his mouth; then swallowed and the cool liquid soothed his throat.

The solid portion of the ration was nearly tasteless, but not otherwise objectionable. Devon finally decided that the faint, background flavor was that of soy beans.

In his hunger, a drop of saliva fell upon the wadded ball of wrapping torn from around the food block. The droplet melted a hole down through the transparent material. Devon observed this, and, when he had finished the brown block, took an experimental bite of the wrapping. It dissolved in his mouth with a taste sweeter than that of the finest pastry his mother had ever baked. He finished the wrapping and tried the empty water bulb. That too reacted with his saliva; it possessed the tart tang of some unidentifiable—to Devon—citrus fruit.

Temporarily fed to repletion, Devon lay back in the chair. He remembered the “Basic Historical Information” cube the spherical projector had commended to him: number forty-three. He started to get up, but then sank back into the soft, accommodating surface. It was comfortable there, and he was simply too tired to move. *I’ll just rest a second*, he thought.

Within moments, Devon slept.

FIFTEEN

The chamber functioned, even as Devon slept.

There was movement, most of it undetectable to a human observer. Electrons streamed through computer circuitry; photons sheeted out from invisible lighting fixtures.

Heat exchangers kept the chamber at an unvarying temperature, compatible with maximized human comfort.

The air filtration system boosted its output slightly to sift out what the chamber's autonomic sensors defined as the offensive (to crew/supercargo) odor rising from the drying puddle of urine in the corner.

The music cube in the top of the playback machine periodically signaled the end of its play-cycle by emitting a soft buzz.

Devon dozed restlessly, but did not wake.

Devon rounded the nether point of the lake called Chastity and dashed toward the house. His parents waited to greet him on the porch. Five stairsteps up to the porch; Devon took them in two.

"Father? Mother?"

Three-sided unity, they clung together a moment, arms encircling one another. Sarah kissed him; her lips were cool. Devon looked at his father. Tears shone in the corners of Old Devon's eyes.

"Are you all right?" said Devon.

His parents exchanged glances. "It's not so bad," said Old Devon. "It's you we're worried about, Son."

"I miss you."

"As do we, Devon." Sarah touched his face. "We miss you more than you can know."

"Will you stay?"

"We cannot, Son," said his father.

"Then why are you here?"

"No, why are you here?"

"I—I'm not sure," said Devon. "I've traveled so far... seen so much."

"You are rash," said his father, "but you are not a fool."

"What do you mean?" Devon looked questioningly at the both of them.

His mother said gently, "Devon, this is so much more than an adventure."

"Micah is implacable," said Old Devon. "He and the others will kill you, should you return to Cypress Corners. He fears and hates you because you are my son."

"I don't understand."

"And you will return," his mother broke in.

"For Rachel," Devon said.

"For Rachel, and much more."

"These are riddles," Devon said. "I—"

Old Devon interrupted. "You will find answers."

Sarah kissed him again. "Goodbye, Devon."

"Wait a moment! You've got to explain—"

His father's voice, deeper. "Nothing's simple, Son. It never has been."

"Please—" Devon extended his arms helplessly. He pivoted, heels scuffing in the ashes. His soles crunched on the floor of dead cinders. Devon turned toward the burned-out skeleton of the barn. "Please," he repeated softly.

In nearby Chastity, a fish broke the surface with a few ripples and a small splash. Other than that, Devon saw no movement, heard no sound.

Devon awoke sweating, with a dull ache throbbing behind his temples. He climbed out of the chair and stood on shaky legs.

The ashes should be there. The lake...

It all flashed past him; where he was and how he had come here. He sat back down on the arm of the chair and let his head drop forward loosely. Devon took several deep, shuddering breaths and waited for orientation to return.

When he felt steadier, he got up again and crossed the chamber to the sphere projector. ASK ME FIRST vanished and the projection appeared, smiling.

"May I help you, sir?"

Devon's mouth and throat felt as though they were coated with thick, soft fur. It took him two attempts to speak intelligibly. "How long did I sleep?"

The projection looked pensive. "Elapsed time: fourteen hours, sixteen minutes, twenty-three seconds."

"All that time?" said Devon. He had never slept more than the eight allotted hours in Cypress Corners.

"Correct, sir."

Devon massaged his temples with his fists. Yawning, he said, "My head hurts."

"I regret," said the sphere projector, "that there are no pharmaceuticals presently available from the service module. Shall I summon a medical section?"

Devon shook his head and found that he didn't wince with the movement. "No, it's going away."

"I've taken the liberty of ordering another survival ration delivered to the service module."

"No thanks, I—" Devon reconsidered in mid-sentence.

He was both hungry and thirsty. "Is there water?"

"Of course, sir."

Devon sighed and levered himself up from the chair. "Isn't there some way of talking to you when I'm not sitting here or standing on the Carpet?"

"Merely depress the blue stud on the left arm of the chair."

Devon did so.

"My visual projection is now engaged for a span of one hour. Should you not reengage the control, I will automatically disengage my image at—" *Breeep*. The sphere projector's voice distorted and wound down. Its mobile expression suddenly froze in place. What appeared to be ripples rolled across its features. A horizontal strip of flesh disappeared from below its moustache, another from above the projection's nose.

Devon could see the opposite wall through the gaps.

The image flickered, then solidified, and the face was again whole. The sphere projector said, "Pardon me. As I was saying, should you not reengage the control, I will automatically disengage my image at the end of that hour."

"What happened just now?" said Devon. "You started to disappear without me touching the control."

The projection's brow furrowed. "A momentary circuit breakdown, sir. Cause is, er—" It stuttered. "Cause is unknown. I've requested a repairmech but as yet have received no confirmation on when a unit may arrive."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Of course, sir. Enjoy your breakfast." The projection's blind eyes tracked Devon as he crossed to the service module.

This new survival packet was identical to the previous ration save that the block of solid food was dark green and tasted of a flavor Devon finally decided might be turnips. As before, he devoured the wrapping material and empty water bulb as dessert.

After finishing the meal, Devon walked to the cube racks. "Forty-three?"

"Forty-three," the sphere projector confirmed.

Devon inserted the cube into one of the honeycomb depressions in the top of the playback machine. A soft, golden cloud of mist formed above the cube.

"Please be seated, sir," said the sphere projector from across the chamber. "Moderate comfort aids the process of information input."

Devon heard a brief fanfare of trumpets, though he did not know what the instruments should be called. He sat down and watched as the golden mist coalesced into the body of a woman. She too was golden. She was one meter in height, and she floated a hand's width above the playback machine.

SIXTEEN

At first Devon thought she was a girl, but revised his estimate when he realized the true proportions of her body. The woman wore a skin-tight body garment several shades lighter than her skin. Her hands, face, and feet were copper-colored—not gold as Devon had first thought. The miniature woman stood looking at him, legs slightly apart, hands resting on her hips.

“Who are you?” he said.

“It’s not a matter of ‘who,’” she said. “You should ask ‘what.’” Her voice was louder and deeper than Devon would have expected from a being her size.

“Very well,” he said. “What are you?”

“I am the computer-actuated narrator of this holo cube.”

“Computer?” he said.

“Have you communicated with the sphere projector?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ve experienced a computer.”

“What’s a holo cube?” said Devon.

“Contraction for hologram cube—a projected, three dimensional, moving image.”

“Oh.”

The narrator shifted her position casually. “This is ‘Basic Historical Information’ cube forty-three. May I proceed?”

Devon said, “Well, uh, yes, of course.”

“Very well. This is a continuation of the history of the planet Earth from cube number forty-two.” She paused. “When it became clear that the impending death of the Earth would leave no trace of the human race, it was decided in the year A.D. 2265, to build a giant vessel that could be sent out to deep space, carrying within it a large enough segment of Earth’s population to settle presumed other worlds, in star systems beyond our own—”

Devon interrupted. “There are unfamiliar words... ‘planet’... ‘Earth’... What is ‘deep space?’”

The holo narrator looked slightly impatient. “Geophysical and astronomical data on the home world may be obtained through use of ‘Cartography’ cubes one through six. Do you wish to familiarize yourself with this data before I continue?”

Devon said, “Yes, please.”

“I will wait.” A chair scaled to her size materialized behind the narrator. She sat and crossed her legs as Devon turned to the cube racks. While he searched out the cartography cubes, she leaned forward and clasped her hands around her left knee. She started to

swinging her leg back and forth as Devon returned.

“Should I remove the history cube?” he said.

“There’s no need. Insert the first cartography cube adjacent to cube forty-three.”

He did so. The seated woman vanished. The golden mist glittered and reformed into a sphere the size of Devon’s head. But this was no head in the manner of the sphere projector’s image. Rather it was an almost perfectly round blue ball, partially obscured by blurred patches and streaks of white.

“This,” said a neutral contralto voice, “is the Earth.”

Devon successfully resisted the temptation to ask five immediate questions.

The voice continued: “There are seven major theories as to the formation of the universe, the star-sun Sol, and the planetary system it serves...”

As the narrator spoke, the tableau above the playback machine dissolved and reformed. “Please feel free to ask questions at any time.” A suspended sphere of utter blackness pooled above the device. The voice began, “The concept of the oscillating universe...”

At first Devon stared, awed and fascinated. Then he began to ask questions, requiring definitions, inquiring after less complex meanings, and searching for usable touchstones. The lectures took a long while; Devon lost all track of time as he watched the multiplex creation of the universe, the coalescence of galaxies, the formation of stars and planets.

Hours later his fingers shook but his mind soared as Devon extracted the last cartography cube from the playback device. The mist shimmered and once more reformed into the female narrator from the basic historical information cube. She rose from her chair and looked down at Devon.

“Are you now sufficiently informed on such terms as ‘planet Earth’ and ‘deep space’?”

Devon said wonderingly, “We’re all on some kind of ship; we’re moving through ‘space.’ We all come from a giant world, a planet, a place called the Earth.”

“Should I call a medical section?” said the narrator. “Are you well?”

Slowly, delightedly, Devon began to laugh aloud. The narrator coughed disapprovingly. Devon laughed until his cheeks were wet with tears. Finally he said: “I’m fine! I’m just very, very fine! Please go on; tell me more. I want to know it all. I want to know *everything!*”

The narrator considered him dubiously. Then she went on. “As I said earlier, when the cataclysm that was to destroy the Earth was seen to be an inevitability—” Devon said, “What *was* the catastrophe?”

“Vastator.”

"I don't know what that means."

"You will find that," said the narrator with some small annoyance, "on the preceding cube, number forty-two. Please obtain it for review."

Devon went to the rack; but the slot for cube forty-two was empty. He returned to the playback unit. The holo narrator was in her chair again, this time tapping her foot against nothingness with ill-concealed impatience. "The cube's gone," Devon said.

"The library shows no record of that cube being checked out."

"Well, it's missing anyway. What is Vastator?"

"I am not programmed to synopsise previous cubes. Do you wish me to continue?"

He felt browbeaten and in no condition to squabble, even if the fight were with a one-meter illusory woman. "Yes, ma'am, thank you."

The narrator continued: "Reactions to the impending disaster polarized the world's emotions." She became a more ghostly presence as a scene solidified in front of her.

Devon watched a montage of rioting mobs, fires, pillaging, street battles. People behaving madly, weeping, committing suicide, killing others, raping, looting.

"Most went mad or refused to accept the inevitable," said the narrator. "But a sizable minority, comprised of scientists, artists, philosophers, technicians, and humanitarians in the greater sense, decided to save a viable segment of the Earth's population for a seeding program on other worlds."

The scene before Devon showed a council of apparently kindly and concerned men and women; they sat in conference, talking, planning, drawing up diagrams, staring at each other with weary and compassionate eyes.

"They must have been like gods," he said.

"This is a somewhat simplified version," said the narrator mechanically. "It has been approved by the Committee for Educational Goals for dissemination to all groups of whatever age." She cleared her throat. "I had mentioned the extraterrestrial seeding program. To this end, they began to build the Ark. Humanity had had space travel for three hundred years—"

"Years?" said Devon.

"Solar cycles."

"Oh. Cycles."

"—since the first moon landings in AD 1969," she continued. "But settlement was sparse on Mars and Venus, the only two nearer worlds remotely capable of sustaining life as humankind knew it."

Devon watched spiderlike vehicles dropping slowly down onto a bleak, cratered landscape. He saw even more alien vistas relieved only

by artificial domes. Some of the scenes he had seen in the cartography cubes: different planets floating in space, worlds of eternal cold, others perpetually boiling; one world with a dozen small moons, yet another with none.

“Humankind as a whole wanted no part of the difficult and hostile worlds of the Solar System; further, Vastator would destroy Mars and Venus as well as the Earth. The Solar System clearly could no longer sustain humanity.” The narrator paused. “So the concerned few began the most monumental construction project ever undertaken by humans.”

“The Ark...” said Devon.

“Indeed. Between Earth and the Moon, they began to build the Ark.”

The ungainly assemblage of components took place there in front of Devon. Tiny ships bearing construction materials flew up from the miniature Earth. The Ark slowly took form.

“One thousand, six hundred kilometers plus in length—an organic unit, a clustering of separate globular environmental domes called biospheres; each one at least one hundred kilometers in diameter; all linked by tubular corridors that carried life support, power, communications, and other systems.”

Devon said, “The bounce tubes?”

The narrator nodded. “That was the name quickly acquired by the tubular corridors.” The Ark neared completion between them. “The Ark resembled nothing so much as a cluster of grapes. Into the four hundred and fifty biosphere domes were put entire ecologies, whole segments of the Earth’s population, each in its natural ethnic and cultural state. Samples were drawn from areas as culturally diverse as the Neotechnocratic Republic of Central Africa, and the technologically recidivist settlement of Cypress Corners from North America.”

“Cypress Corners,” said Devon. “I’m from there.”

The narrator looked at him coolly. “More precisely, your ancestors were from there.”

Devon watched an incredibly diverse array of migrations as the narrator called out the catalog:

Groups of colonists from sophisticated nations such as England and Pacifica, Maracott Dome and Japan.

An entire primitive tribe, complete with rain forest, from the interior of something called the Matto Grosso.

The population of Greenland.

Delegations from Malawi, Denmark, Sri Lanka, Libya, Quebec, Lower Kunda, Ireland, Catalan, and all the other remaining nations of the Earth.

So-called special interest affinity groups: totalicrats, Catholics, neo-biologists, back-to-the-soilites, Jews.

An entire city called San Francisco.

Devon saw an exodus of every variety of humanity: brown, black, red, white, yellow, tall, short, poor, rich. Ship after ship ferried them up to the Ark as each new biosphere was fitted for habitation.

"As nearly as possible, each group took up with them their old lives. However successful or unsuccessful the experiment, the builders of the Ark attempted to transplant fragile cultural roots."

And my world, Devon thought. He watched the Elders of the original Cypress Corners lead their congregations into the shuttle ship. *World?* He smiled wryly.

"Once stocked with a supercargo of three million humans and all they would need to sustain them on a centuries-long journey to the nearest bright star, Alpha Centauri, and its planetary system," said the narrator, "the Ark was launched."

A closeup of the Ark as it almost imperceptibly began to move. The perspective shot back. Devon saw a glittering midge sail with stately slowness past the Moon and toward the outer planets.

The narrator said, "In this shot, the time and space scale has, of course, been necessarily compressed."

Devon marveled. "How can such an enormous thing be driven?"

"Power is generated from a set of controlled thermonuclear reactors, CTRs for short. The CTRs recreate in small scale the conditions in the heart of a star. For a fuller explanation, I must refer you to physics cube twenty-two."

The Ark crossed the orbit of Pluto and entered the void between the stars.

The narrator continued: "Supercargo was kept isolated from crew in hopes that each world would develop its own way, preserving the best of its heritage without undue influence from any hierarchy that might arise from crew members and technicians. The crew was housed in domes around the outer perimeter of the cluster, with ethnic biospheres in the center."

The scene of the Ark crossing a starry backdrop abruptly disappeared. The image of the copper-skinned narrator solidified. "The Ark traveled for one hundred Earth years and then there was indication of a difficulty... there was an accident... this accident..." The woman paused and frowned. "Pardon me." Her face became blank. "There was... the accident destroyed..."

"What's wrong?" said Devon.

"... accident... apparent black... was..."

Devon almost shouted, "I can't understand you."

"...dead... there..."

Both the voice and the image of the holo narrator began to fade. She pointed one arm toward Devon. He saw her mouth open and close silently. Then her image pulsed in and out and was gone. The golden mist was left, sparkling with scintillas of light. After a moment, it too vanished.

Devon stood up excitedly. "An accident... *what* accident? Tell me! Come back, please come back!"

He approached the playback device and jiggled basic historical information cube number forty-three in its socket; nothing happened. He tapped it with an index finger, then smartly rapped it with his knuckles. Still nothing; the cube was dead.

Devon rushed back to the racks and fumbled along the row of basic historical information cubes. He thought he had miscounted and retraced a step; finally he turned away from the rack.

There was no cube numbered forty-four.

SEVENTEEN

The sphere projector smiled at him. "Yes, sir, may I help you?"

Devon said, "The cube stopped."

"Its message was probably complete, sir. Have you consulted subsequent cubes?"

"There aren't any. That was the last one."

The projection raised its eyebrows. "Then that's all there is, sir."

"But the woman said the Ark traveled in space for a hundred cycles and then something happened that caused all this damage..."

The sphere projector prompted Devon, as though expecting him to continue. "Yes, sir?"

Devon said, "What was it?"

"What, sir?"

"The accident."

"I have no idea of the specifics," the projection said apologetically. "That isn't my function."

Devon stared beyond the sphere projector. He said slowly, as if to himself, "Whatever it was, it must have killed the crew and everyone who was outside the biospheres..."

"Out of curiosity, sir, upon which data do you base that extrapolative conclusion?"

"Because... wait a minute." Devon looked excitedly back at the projection. "What year is this?"

"Earth dating, sir?"

"Yes. The AD number you and the holo woman use."

"This is AD 2785, sir."

"2785." Devon looked at his fingers and calculated. "The woman said the Ark was launched in AD 2265 or thereabouts. Another hundred cycles until the accident.... That would make it..."

"Four hundred and twenty," said the projection helpfully.

"Yes. Thanks." Devon pondered the figure. "The Ark traveled for more than four hundred cycles without any communication between the biospheres." His voice quickened with excitement. "We all forgot we were on a ship. We forgot the cataclysm, and the accident, whatever it was... and we even forgot the Earth. We lived as if our entire universe was a hundred kilometers across with a metal sky..."

"That seems highly unlikely to me, sir."

"No, don't you see? We're like prisoners. We were born and died in our little domes and never knew there was anything else out there."

The projection's voice stiffened. "If true, that would seem to me to be a definite cultural retardant. Hardly healthy for the individual societies of the biospheres." Devon scarcely heard the words. "In

Cypress Corners we forgot completely. In all those other domes... what must they be like?"

"I am afraid I do not possess those specifics," said the projection.

"I have to *tell* them!" Devon said.

"Tell whom, sir? Cross-cultural contact between the respective biospheres is expressly forbidden."

"*Them*. Cypress Corners."

"You are a native, are you not, sir? I believe it would then be allowable."

Devon said intensely, "I'll tell them. I'll show them. I'll get more of these suits and take them outside Cypress Corners and show them the *real* stars. And the ship! I'll show Micah that his is but one world among many." The gloating in his voice softened. "And Rachel... I'll show her *everything*. We'll travel through the bounce tubes to the other biospheres."

"Excuse me, sir. Bounce tubes are off limits to supercargo."

"Who will stop us?" said Devon.

"Crew security, sir."

"There is no crew. They're all long dead."

"I'd been wondering about that," said the sphere projector. "The repairmech I summoned has still not arrived. It is most irregular."

Devon snapped his fingers. "The voyage," he said. "The Ark is supposed to arrive at the planets of a star called Alpha Centauri. When will that happen?"

The projection hesitated, looking as if it were searching inward for bits of information buried deeper than any it had already offered up. "It will not happen, sir."

"It has to," said Devon. "The history cube said so."

"The voyage of the Ark will not end as was originally planned."

Devon realized he was not asking the right questions. "Why will it not happen as planned?"

The projection looked unhappy. "The Ark has been off-course for approximately four hundred and twenty years."

"Off-course?" said Devon. "It was the accident that did this?"

"It apparently was the factor you call the accident, sir."

"Then we're not going to, uh, Alpha Centauri?"

"I'm afraid not," said the projection. "The Ark is presently programmed on a course that will take it into the heart of a G-type star if that course is not corrected." Devon said, "What's a G-type star? You mean something like the sun?"

"Very like the sun, sir."

"What does that mean?"

The sphere projector said gently, "The Ark will be destroyed and all aboard will die, sir."

Devon drew one long breath. "It can't be."

"My reasoning banks indicate there is better than a ninety-nine percent probability."

"When?" said Devon. "How soon? How much time is left?"

"At our present rate of progress, sir, I can estimate just under five Earth-years."

Devon tried to digest what the machine had told him. Less than five cycles left—when the Ark and all on her had been condemned to death four hundred and twenty cycles earlier? "It's unfair," he finally said aloud. "Horribly unfair."

"I am not equipped to draw moral conclusions," said the sphere projector. "But if I could, sir, I suspect I would agree with you."

"There must be something that can be done," said Devon. "Isn't there?"

The projection hesitated. "The guidance system of the Ark could presumably be utilized for course corrections, sir. Such a plan would involve reprogramming of the astrogation computers."

"Who would do that?"

"It is a crew function, sir."

"But there is no crew!"

"There is indeed a high probability of that situation, sir. Still, *I* have received no absolute proof of such a circumstance."

"Could I do it myself?"

"The probabilities are not very high, sir."

"*Somebody's* got to do something," said Devon. "I've got to go back to Cypress Corners and warn them, get them to remember, somehow convince them to help me turn the Ark.... We'll find the crew, someone who knows how to save the Ark. There are almost five cycles left.... *Somehow* it can be done."

The sphere projector said, "Sir?"

"What?"

"I have consulted all entries on my banks relating to the Cypress Corners biosphere. Last current demographic data indicates that the natives suffer on a group basis from acute, pathological xenophobia, as well as laboring under a broad spectrum of cultural repressions. I can extrapolate only a small probability of your fellow natives aiding you. You should know that those you wish to warn will not honor you for the knowledge."

"I'm not sure what all you just said," Devon answered, "but I get the feeling from it." He thought for a while. "I don't have a choice. I've got to try."

"The probabilities—"

"I know," said Devon. "I heard you before."

Man and machine remained in silence for several minutes.

Almost as an afterthought, Devon said, "Tell me just one thing more, if you can."

"I'll try, sir."

"What does 'Vastator' mean?"

"'Vastator.' It is Latin for 'destroyer.'"

"Can you give me any details?"

The projection looked vague. Devon could almost interpret the expression as evasive. "Not at the present time, sir."

"The thing called Vastator—did it have anything to do with the Ark's accident?"

"I cannot say, sir."

With chin resting on palm, Devon regarded the sphere projector. "I'm going to return to Cypress Corners. I think I can remember the way back."

"Sir, may I remind you that bounce tubes are off limits to supercargo."

Devon ignored the words. "Would it be possible, please, for me to have another survival ration to take with me?"

"One has been ordered, sir. You may pick it up from the service module."

Devon climbed into the transparent suit. He hesitated before connecting the helmet. "Whoever you are, thank you for talking with me."

"It is my function, sir. No thanks are necessary." The projection's face beamed.

"Perhaps I'll talk with you again." Devon placed the helmet over his head and rotated it until the locking mechanism *snicked*. He picked up the survival ration from the service module and started toward the access lockport.

Behind him, the projection bobbed with benign expression within the metal hoop. The image wavered, solidified momentarily, and then began to fragment.

"Good luck, sir," said the sphere projector. Patches of transparency pocked the projection's face. In a moment, all that was left was the smile.

And then that too disappeared.

EIGHTEEN

The dead woman waited for him in the blue-lit corridor between the memory bank terminal and the viewport chamber. She lay back gracelessly in the center of the tunnel as she had for hundreds of cycles, uncaring but no longer unchanged. Devon looked at her face again as he passed, then quickly looked away. Before, he had noted her extraordinary beauty. Now, her face had begun to decompose.

Why? he wondered. There still was no gravity in this small portion of the Ark, but there was air where before there had been only vacuum. *That must be it.* Devon recalled dimly one of his earliest memories: his mother spending feverish hours canning vegetables and fruits; a container of preserved peaches one night bursting and spattering the cellar walls with pulp. The odor, sweet, heavy, cloying, had made him sick.

He had a sudden, vivid mental picture of the dead woman swelling up and—Devon clamped down on the thought, concentrated on seeing her face as it had been.

He swept through a shimmering curtain of suspended water globules; they shattered and slowly reformed behind him.

Was she crew? Was she caught here during the accident?

“Stop it,” he said to himself, his voice unnaturally loud inside the helmet.

Did she have a lover? A husband?... who died at the same time, unknown to her, unknowing to himself?

“I don’t want to think about this.” Again he spoke aloud; spoke to an invisible companion. And then she was not invisible. The dead woman paced him there in the corridor, matching him stroke for stroke through the air. Devon stared at her ruined face.

We’ll all be like you. In less than five cycles.

No, she answered. Better than this. Finer. Ash is much to be preferred to rotting flesh and bone. Her mouth distorted in a ghastly smile.

Did you have a lover? Devon asked again.

No answer.

Rachel.

Devon saw a faint crimson glow distantly down the corridor. It was the control plate for the lockport.

Rachel, I want you.

NINETEEN

The sunless world of bounce tubes, viewports, and the chamber of the sphere projector, had disoriented Devon. His body fed him spurious messages as he sailed along the final passage of bounce tube. He was positive he would emerge into morning.

Thus Devon was surprised when the iris dilated and he pulled himself up into darkness. He wondered how many days and nights he had been gone. This dark was the utter blackness that indicated the moon had set.

The iris hissed shut and the protective shell closed over the controlling light-plate. Devon sneezed as the dust began to settle. He crawled out from beneath the thicket, occasionally stopping while he twisted an arm behind his back to unsnag one of the larger thorns. Then he was free of the briars; he stood and walked to the edge of the trees.

He was unsure of his next move. It had been easy at the time to determine the *what* of his plans—that he would return to Cypress Corners, educate his people to the real nature of their universe, and enlist their aid in saving the Ark. What bothered him now that he had time to reflect, was the *how* of all that. What had the sphere projector said? “*You should know that those you wish to warn will not honor you for the knowledge.*” But if they would not aid, at least would they not stand in his way? *It’s doubtful*, he thought.

How few of them will even listen to me? Rachel? Garth? Old Esther? He smiled at the thought of Granny Esther accompanying him on an expedition to save the Ark. But mightn’t the end of the world be a shock sharp enough to stab through their complacency?

First plans first. Devon stood at the edge of the meadow and contemplated the stars. Look at them.... No wonder they twinkle in set patterns. They must be placed there by some machine like the sphere projector. They’re nothing like the real stars that shine unvaryingly. We’ve been victimized all these cycles by those shoddy imitations of the real thing.... His spirits began to rise buoyantly. When the ship is saved, we’ll have real stars....

The first thing Devon decided was to find Rachel. He estimated the briar thicket to lie about three kilometers from Aram’s house. His eyes had adjusted well to the night. Devon kept to the open fields and only once stepped into an irrigation ditch.

As he had anticipated, Aram’s farmstead was completely dark. The family had long since retired. Devon trudged up the road to the house and Dog rushed toward him, barking. “Hush, Dog. That’s a good boy.” Devon hunkered down and let Dog recognize him. The small brown

collie growled once, then sniffed again and, tail wagging, trotted up to Devon. "Sorry," said Devon. "I wish I had some food for you. This'll have to make do." He gently stroked Dog for a few minutes. Dog made a small whimper of pleasure and slobbered on Devon's other hand.

"Now keep quiet," said Devon. "I would visit your mistress." Dog loped ahead as Devon continued past the barn, toward the house.

Once past the gate in the yard's picket fence, Devon stopped to consider logistics. Rachel's loft window was a good two meters out of reach. He scooped up a handful of pebbles from the graveled path to the porch and dumped them into his overalls pocket. Then he started to shinny up the apple tree beside the corner of the house. Dog danced around the trunk, yapping, thinking it was a game.

"Hush!" Devon whispered. Confused and abashed, Dog sat back on his haunches to watch.

Devon found a main branch that forked off from the trunk toward the general direction of the loft window. He hunched out along it, using other branches for handholds. The limb began to groan ominously when he was about a meter from the window. Keeping his balance with one hand, Devon extracted a pebble with the other. He tossed it, but the pebble was deflected by a clump of leaves. His next shot ticked against the glass pane. There was no response from inside. It took nine pebbles.

Finally, with a slight hinge-squeak, the double windows swung outward. Rachel's face appeared, white against the dark interior of the loft. Her features were slack with sleep. She peered out, not seeing Devon, and then started to withdraw.

"Rachel—" Louder than a whisper.

"Is someone there? Who is it?" Her words were sleep-slurred.

"It's me, Rachel."

"Devon?" She glanced over her shoulder and then back intently at the tree. "Be quiet lest Ruth awaken."

Devon said, "I have much to tell you."

"Ssh."

He lowered his voice. "I've seen wonders few would believe. But I've come back to get you."

"Devon, Elder Micah has declared you to be an agent of chaos. The men have hunted you each day since you disappeared. The Creator's machine speaks against you."

"I know... I know..." said Devon wearily. "We all live under the rule of the Elders. But they're *wrong*, Rachel. So wrong, you can't know."

"The Creator's machine speaks of a death decree—"

"Rachel, listen to me. I've been outside of this little hundred-kilometer world. Everything I dreamed about in the hills, everything I wondered about is true. I've seen such wonders. The stars, and the

black of space, and the inconceivable size of this great Ark we ride.”

Rachel said, “You’re frightening me, Devon. Perhaps they’re right; maybe you *are* a child of evil.”

“Do you believe that?”

She hesitated. “I don’t care if you are.”

“Then listen to me,” he said. He wanted to talk. Everything the sphere projector and holo narrator had told him, he wanted to spill out. “Listen, the Elders, your parents, all the rest... they are blind. They see only what they wish to see. As long as they are told what to do and their crops come in hardy, they don’t care how the world is run. They are little people, and they are doomed because of their worship of ignorance.”

“Devon, Ruth—”

“No! Listen, this is important, more important even than us.” He gulped a breath. “The Creator was a metalsmith who devised ways for structuring the sky so it would never rust or corrode or fall. The Creator was something called an environmentalist who plotted our world and all the others on graphs so they would run for a thousand cycles without breaking down.”

Rachel said, “I don’t know what these words mean!”

“The Creator was a philanthropist who knew she would die when the Earth died, and she gave all her wealth to set this metal Ark afloat in a sea of darkness. There was an accident, Rachel. A terrible thing that killed those I who *really* ran the ship; not the Elders, but *crew*, men and women like us... and the accident threw us all back, like barbarians, and we spent four hundred cycles becoming I what we are today... so much less than what we *need* to be, to survive—”

She interrupted him. “Stop! Please, Devon, you’re upsetting me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to—”

“It’s not those things. I don’t care what new dreams you’ve had in the hills and what wonders you’ve encountered. It’s the Elders—”

“Rachel—”

“—and it’s the Creator’s machine. Do you want the death decree to become a surety? And that it will if Elder Micah should hear you speak of this. Devon, all these strange dreams you mention—”

“They’re not dreams,” he said. “They are real and they can’t be escaped or wished away.”

“I fear for you,” said Rachel.

“I fear for us. Even should Micah and the others take my life, not one of them would live more than five cycles. Not anybody, not even —” He chopped off the word, unwilling even to say it.

Rachel leaned from the window and put out her hand. Still clutching one solid hold, Devon extended his right arm. Their hands met in space and their fingers plaited together. Devon welcomed the

warmth of the touch.

"I wish that I could help you," she said.

"There is a way," he said, "now."

She waited silently.

"During my exile... the hill on which we met. Have they searched there?"

She nodded. "Two days ago. Tomorrow the men will search the hills in the north."

"Then I'll go back to that hill. I need time to think out what I wish to do. Will you bring me food?"

"Of course," she said, disengaging her fingers. "Just a moment." Rachel disappeared from the black rectangle of window.

Devon tried to estimate how long she was gone. He silently counted up to sixty by thousands. Five times. Six. He thought he could see the first faint glow of dawn in the east. He hoped it was only his imagination.

"Devon?"

He turned back to the window.

"Can you catch this if I throw it?"

"I'll try." He took a firmer grip on the limb above. "Is it heavy?"

"No." She tossed the bundle in a short arc. He caught it neatly.

"What is it?"

"Bread, cheese, several apples picked from the tree in which you perch, some strips of dried beef. Now wedge that in a fork; I have something else." She threw him something soft and bound tightly with cord. "It's a quilted comforter. The autumn darkness grows chillier nightly."

"Won't your parents know?"

She laughed softly. "There are many apples, much cheese; the bread is stale. The comforter is a spare for my sister and me to use when the winter arrives."

"Thank you," said Devon.

"I will try to bring you more," she said. "Perhaps I can come tomorrow, after vespers."

"I wish I could kiss you."

"I too, Devon. I love you." Then she quietly shut the window.

Devon had to shoo Dog back when he reached the edge of Aram's property. Dog retreated reluctantly after he was tossed a bit of cheese from the precious packet of food. Devon waited for his own meal until he had gained the hills.

TWENTY

Aram and his family were awake and functioning an hour before dawn. Both Rachels, Old and Young, began preparing breakfast. When that was done, they would start cooking the midday meal for the men who would arrive in another hour to help Aram with his harvest. Aram and his neighbors had willingly participated for a few days in the search for mad Devon. But time was time and the wheat would not wait. So the family prepared for the arrival of the harvesters. Aram and Ruth fed the horses, milk cows, and the other beasts.

The kitchen steamed with the rich odors of ham, sliced potatoes frying, eggs, fresh bread, early apple sauce, and the steeping pot of bitter, black tea. "What about the bread," Old Rachel said. "Have we enough loaves?"

Her oldest daughter looked up from the sink. "Loaves?"

"Yes. Loaves."

"Loaves..." Young Rachel looked vague.

"Of bread," said her mother. "For the noon meal. We have at least eight men to feed."

"I'm sorry, Mother. My thought was elsewhere." Young Rachel concentrated. "The three loaves yet unbaked will make it enough."

"Are there not four loaves?"

"Yes, Mother, there are four." She rattled the dishes in the sink.

Old Rachel wondered what could be wrong now. "Is something the matter, child?"

"No, Mother."

Old Rachel ticked off possibilities in her mind. It couldn't be the horror—Young Rachel had negotiated that female ritual four years before. Still, perhaps it could be that time of the month—mother and daughter rarely confided in one another about woman's secrets.

"Daughter, is it the horror?"

"Oh no, Mother!" Young Rachel looked shocked.

"Oh."

Old Rachel speculated on other possibilities. There was the recent unpleasantness with mad Devon. "Are you still upset about that terrible night with Devon appearing here, having attacked the Elders and stolen a sacred relic from the Creator's machine?"

"I have pushed that from my mind."

Old Rachel absently whittled the eyes from the panful of potatoes. Perhaps she should attempt a more positive tack. "Your father has spoken with Old Garth."

"Oh?" said her daughter noncommittally.

"The stiffness in Old William's joints seems to grow by the day. He

is no longer unwilling to quit the forge. Young Garth has been a capable and willing pupil. I think we shall see Young Garth no longer apprenticed, but as the metalsmith himself before the winter is out."

"I'm happy to hear that," said Young Rachel. "Garth will make a fine smith."

"When he accedes to the smithy," said Old Rachel, "he will also be permitted to marry."

Her daughter said nothing.

"Young Garth is a fine man. He is strong and dependable."

"He is that," said Young Rachel. Musing, she added, "He also has no imagination."

"What?"

"Nothing, Mother."

Old Rachel felt angry and somehow hurt. "Daughter, he will be an excellent husband."

"I'm sure he will, Mother."

Her voice tightened. "Rachel, Young Garth *will* be your husband."

"As decreed by the Creator's machine."

"Yes. As according to the Creator's plan."

They each worked in silence for a while. Old Rachel finished the potatoes and started slicing the ham. Young Rachel slid a tray of bran muffins into the oven.

"Mother? You always knew you would marry Father?"

"Of course, child. Our betrothal was known to our parents from birth. The Creator's machine issued the genetic pronouncement, just as it did for my parents, and my grandparents, and so on."

"But didn't you ever—wonder?"

"Wonder about what?" Her eyes widened with puzzlement.

"Whether—" Young Rachel picked for words. "Whether it was something you should do?"

"*Should* do?" The older woman shook her head. "Of course not. It was a certainty."

Young Rachel sat aimlessly, hands still in her lap.

"Daughter, the potatoes should be turned."

"But didn't you ever question the certainty?" Young Rachel's voice involuntarily lowered as though she were uttering a public obscenity. She walked slowly to the stove.

"What's that?" said her mother. "Question it? Certainly not—I've never questioned any pronouncement of the Creator's machine. Nor of the Elders."

"Did you love him?"

"Your father?"

Young Rachel nodded.

"What had love to do with anything? He was—is my husband. Aram

is as fine a man in his own right as Young Garth is in his. Love is a meaningless word."

"I do not love Young Garth."

Old Rachel shrugged and said, "That has nothing to do with the marriage; it would be impious to think it did." Young Rachel turned away, saying nothing.

Her mother caught the small movements of her shoulders. "Child, are you crying?" She put down the slicing knife and crossed the kitchen to her daughter. Her hands were clumsy because she was not accustomed to holding her children; but she clasped her arms around Young Rachel. "Oh daughter, daughter," she crooned. "Is it so important to you, love? Your husband will be good to you. He will care for you."

"It isn't just love," said Young Rachel in a small voice. "It is the lack of choice."

Her mother sighed. "'Choice is the breeding pool for temptation,'" she quoted, "'and temptation is the spawning ground for sin.'"

Young Rachel continued to cry.

"You will become accustomed," said her mother. "I did."

They held each other silently for another minute. Then both heard the approaching voices from outside.

"Your father and Ruth," said Old Rachel. "Come, there is food to serve." She crossed to the stove.

Aram stamped into the kitchen, clapping his hands together. "Cold!" he said. "The chill of Belesh is upon the land. Wouldn't surprise me if it frosted any night now."

"I will pick the last of the tomatoes today," said Old Rachel.

Aram nodded agreement. "Good thing we got the apples in."

Young Rachel set down the teapot on the table. Casually, but without looking at her father, she said, "How cold do you suppose it is in the hills?"

"Well, daughter, that's hard to say." Aram looked puzzled. "Being they're closer to the sun, I'd guess they'd be warmer. Except during the night when it's the moon they're up near to—then I'd guess they'd be colder." His face assumed an irritated expression at having been asked such a foolish question. "Have you got some good reason for asking?"

"I was curious."

"Wasteful talk," said Aram. He sat down at the head of the table and began to serve the food. Breakfasts were usually quiet, save for the sound of champing jaws and Aram's running monologue in which he plotted out the course of the work day.

"... if we can finish off the forty by the creek by noon, then I'll send Joshua and Young Jedediah up to mend that fence—"

“Father?”

Aram frowned at Young Rachel. “Daughter?”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Is it more important than that foolish query about the weather in the hills?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Very well.” Aram used the respite to cram half a slice of crisp bread into his mouth.

Young Rachel said, “When will the end of the world come?”

Ruth giggled. Her mother hushed her with a silent look.

Aram chewed contemplatively. After a while, he swallowed and said, “The Book tells us it is so.”

“But when?”

“Is this a matter of immediate interest?” said Aram sternly. “The end will come when the Creator sees fit. And that will happen only when sin has assumed the ascendancy.”

“Soon?”

“I shouldn’t think so,” said her father, “though there are those who think the demonic possession of Devon can be construed as a sign.”

“Could it be?”

“A sign? Elder Jubal told me that the madman Devon is more likely a warning from the Maker that piety is coming into precious short supply in Cypress Corners.” He ruminated. “Just look for yourself. You can see it all around. Order is becoming loosened. There are those who ignore the rules. Impious questions are increasingly asked.” Aram looked glum. “I knew it, I watched it coming for cycles. Nothing has come without warning.” He sighed. “I did not pray enough.”

“Then perhaps the end *is* near,” said Young Rachel.

Her father raised his head. “Why must you make my breakfast more melancholy, daughter? The harvest weighs heavily enough without adding the burden of world’s end.”

She said quietly, “I am sorry, Father.”

Aram returned to his food.

Young Rachel said, “I beg pardon, but I have one more question.”

Putting down his fork, Aram said, “What is it?”

A pause, then: “How shall the world end?”

“Don’t you know, daughter? I’ve read the prophecy often enough over the cycles.” He looked thoughtful. “The Creator has decreed it; Cypress Corners shall be destroyed in fire.”

TWENTY-ONE

While Aram and his neighbors harvested the wheat, while Elders Jubal and Micah and a small army of conscripted searchers combed the northern hills of Cypress Corners, Devon slept atop his hill in the south.

The sun had risen into its first full frame as Devon reached the deer trail. The valley was fully awake before he gained the summit. The clear dawn air magnified and carried to him the morning sounds of animals and humans. He heard the clinking, metallic sound of calves nosing hungrily into grain buckets as though he stood there in the corrals himself.

Once upon the hilltop, he climbed behind the screening brush. Devon wrapped himself in the dark blue quilted comforter and ate a welcome breakfast of cheese and bread and apple. He left part of the core and tossed it aside for the birds.

It took only a few minutes to assemble a new bed of pine boughs. Still wound in the quilt, Devon lay down. Later, he didn't remember even adjusting his body to reach a compromise with the contours of the pine bed. He fell asleep immediately.

Old Devon strode up the hill, burning as he walked. The flames curled around his limbs, fanned out from the long dark beard, yet his flesh was not consumed. His son sat up from a deeper sleep and watched him come. Old Devon approached close, but there was no smoke and no heat.

"Do not bend away from me. I cannot hurt you."

"I know, Father."

The old man sat down crosslegged, facing Devon. "It's all very well that you've gotten back to Cypress Corners safely—but right now that's a hollow achievement."

"I know that too."

"Micah will comb this land—he will let the balance of the harvest go hang—if only to catch you."

"But why?" said Devon. "I don't threaten him. Now that I know about the coming destruction of the Ark, all I want to do is help."

His father said, "You can ask him that question yourself soon enough. My concern is that you live long enough to do something with the answer."

"I'll live—if only to take Rachel away from here."

Old Devon smiled. "I wanted a spirited son. I'm pleased." He stood and started back to the path. Over his shoulder, he said, "Now it's all up to you."

"Is that all?" Devon called.

The answer floated back from below the crest. "Love and friendship are

handy, but count on yourself first.” The flames died away in the air.

Devon awoke in plenty of time to watch the hands straggle in from the fields at sundown.

TWENTY-TWO

"I should hate to die in fire," said Rachel, shivering inside the makeshift tent they had made of the quilt.

Devon said, "The sphere projector assured me it would be very quick. Just an instant before we became ash."

"Just the same, I would not like it. What time is it?"

Devon poked his head into the outer air. "Still at least two hours before moonset."

"I must return soon. I've behaved badly at home and I think my mother suspects."

"And Aram?"

"Don't speak of him. If he knew, he would be standing above you with a scythe."

Devon said, "If I fear any man, it's he."

"Not Elder Micah?"

Devon was silent for a while. "Him too."

There was another lapse until Rachel said, "Tell me more of the ship and the world beyond this one."

"What have I not told you?"

She retorted, "That is something *you* should know, not I." She lightly tugged his ears.

"I'm not sure I can remember it all," he said, "there was so much." Devon lifted one end of the quilt again. "Look—see the stars?"

"Of course."

"Watch them twinkle and wane, as commonplace as fireflies in the woods."

"I like fireflies," said Rachel.

Devon continued, slightly annoyed. "Think what it will be like when you see the real stars shining bright and steady."

"I think it will frighten me."

"But why?"

"Your stars remind me of beasts' eyes shining in the dark."

Devon said, "What beasts?"

"The beasts of the hills."

He laughed. "I've found few beasts here, and the ones I did discover were all friendly. It's the ones in the valley I worry about."

Rachel laughed with him. "The beasts are in the stories my mother told me, cycles ago. Little girls asked unwholesome questions and always came to a terrible end. I would dream night after night about animal eyes glowing in the dark, staring at me and never blinking. And I was afraid to ask questions."

Devon said, "My parents encouraged me to ask questions, until they

died.”

“I remember that,” she said softly. “Aram helped fight the fire.”

“Everyone did.” He paused. “I don’t remember anything of that night. They told me I crawled out, almost dead from the smoke; and then they had to hold me because I tried to go back in. I must have seen the faces in the circle above me and known my parents weren’t among them.”

“It’s true. Aram told us that.”

“I remember nothing until I woke up the next morning on a hard bed in Granny Esther’s house. She pretended to be deaf because she didn’t know what to answer me. It took her an hour to tell me my mother and father were dead.”

“I asked my father about the prophecy of fire,” Rachel said. “The one in the Book.”

“It’s coincidence!” Devon twisted around. “The Ark is not going to plunge into the heart of a star. We aren’t going to die that way.”

Rachel said seriously, “Can we really stop it?”

“We will.” The words were flat. “We are going to find those who can help us, and then we are going to set the Ark back on course. We may never live to see the ship’s destination, but our children will. Or their children.”

“Children?” Rachel said.

“Children.” He kissed her with a tenderness that grew suddenly into something more powerful than either of them had anticipated.

“Devon, I love you.”

“Rachel,” he said, and echoed the words.

“Tell me I am not damned for this.”

“You told me it didn’t matter to you.”

“And so it doesn’t.” She brought his mouth close again.

“It’s getting closer to moonset.”

“You tease me,” she said. “Do not throw my words back in my face.”

Devon pulled her close then; their lips met and moved like live things. His hands brushed along her sides, made the barest pass across her breasts. Warnings, qualms, alarms; Rachel forced them back. Something steeled in her mind, as much simple resolve as passion.

“This time,” she said, “shall I take off all my clothing?”

“And I?” said Devon.

“It would seem only fair.” She laughed, and the sound was both nervous and soft.

“Yes, it would.” Devon’s voice shook slightly.

They helped each other undress. Simple buttons and eyes became formidable barriers. Fingers trembled, turned clumsy as broomsticks. A button popped loose from Rachel’s dress, and they both laughed

longer than was necessary.

At last she slipped her arms out of the garment and pushed it down below her hips. Devon helped, sliding the dress down her legs. At the last, she helped, drawing up her knees to free her feet. The undergarments went more quickly. Rachel placed the rough weave of Devon's shirt between them. Finally they both lay naked, facing each other; close enough that each could feel the heat of the other's body, but nothing more.

Rachel felt his fingers tickle lightly along her flank. In turn she reached out to touch the place between his legs that still gave her so much wonder. She handled him gently, but heard him draw in a quick breath. "I'm sorry," she said. "Did I hurt you?"

Devon said, "No. Just the opposite."

She continued to touch his penis, less tentatively now. She heard his breath quickening. Rachel said, "What do you want me to do?"

"That," said Devon. "Anything. I don't know." He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her against him.

"Don't be rough. Please."

"I'm sorry." His kiss was gentler, but she could feel his tension. "It won't be like last time."

"I know—"

Devon kissed her again; her lips, then her neck and down to her breasts. She plaited her fingers in his hair and pulled his head against her chest. After a time he freed himself and said, "I love you."

"And I, you..."

The fumbling time came when Rachel rolled onto her back and Devon knelt between her knees. "I don't know how to put my legs," she said.

Devon said, "Nor I, mine." They both laughed nervously, and clumsily maneuvering, found a compromise. Supporting himself with one arm, he began to penetrate her.

She cried out and twisted her body away from his.

"What's wrong?" he said. "Is it hurting you?"

"Yes," she said, eyes squeezed shut.

"Don't you want to do it?"

"Yes," she said. "No. I don't know." She rolled her head from side to side. Then she turned back toward him and said, "Do it slowly... it hurts very much."

He tried to obey, to gentle the act, but felt his body move against his will in tiny, impatient jerks. His fingers curled and dug into her flesh.

"Devon!" Then Rachel cried out her parents' names and recoiled, rolling away from him. She lay doubled up, hugging herself, sobbing uncontrollably.

"I didn't mean—" He stopped, not knowing what he didn't mean. Devon touched her shoulder unsurely. At first she tried blindly to push him away from her; then she let him hold her tightly. She continued to cry. "Rachel..." He stroked her hair. "I love you." Eventually she wept herself to exhaustion. Devon continued to hold her while she slept.

Later:

They curled against each other like a pair of young puppies. The night had crept through the quilt and they sought the silent, automatic, uncomplicated warmth of flesh against flesh. Devon started to drowse off to sleep, then twitched awake.

Rachel raised her head. "What is the matter?"

"I started to dream."

"Sleep, if you wish."

Devon said, "There was something unpleasant lurking below the hills.... I don't think I want to sleep."

Rachel kept a long silence. "Tonight..." she said. "I'm sorry."

"Hush," said Devon. "There have been too many apologies tonight."

"But I—"

"No." He lightly kissed her face. "It doesn't matter, not as long as you're not hurt."

Her features subtly changed. "Devon!" Her voice was angry. Surprised, he drew back. "Don't treat me like a child," she said, "or, or —" fumbling for the words, "like one of Old Elijah's wooden figures you told me about. I won't crack, I won't break."

"All right," Devon slowly said. "All right."

"I just want to tell you why—" She stopped to take a deeper breath. "I want to tell you what happened tonight." Rachel pulled the quilt loose from their faces and the chill air poured around them. She turned her head to look at Devon in the starlight. "When we tried to do what we did," said Rachel, "we were not alone."

"I don't understand," Devon said.

"When we—we touched like that, and you started to come inside me, I saw my mother and Aram; they were standing above us. I saw the Elders beside them, Micah and Jubal and the rest. They were all there, and they watched us!" She looked at Devon defiantly. "Do you understand now?"

"Yes," he said, and he did.

After a while she said, "They will not always be there."

"No." He held her tightly. More silence, and then he changed the subject. "Have you thought about what I asked you before?"

"About leaving? Going with you out beyond the world to see all the wonders you've described. I have thought much."

“Have you decided?”

She hesitated. “It would be difficult to leave this life when my place in it has been set since long before I could remember.”

“But it wouldn’t be impossible.”

Rachel shook her head slowly. “No. I suspect not.”

“If you stay, you must marry Garth.”

“I do not want that.”

“Then come with me. I’ll find others. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

“I *want* to...”

“But what?”

“Weren’t you afraid?” she said angrily. “Did you suddenly know it was all a great adventure when you fell through that—that iris-thing?”

Devon stroked her hair. She drew back her head, resisting any attempt at placation. After a time, he said, “Certainly I was afraid. I was terrified. But after a while, the things I encountered fascinated me.” He paused. “Remember Old Jedediah’s two-headed calf?”

Suspiciously, she nodded.

“After that calf was born, I wanted to study it. But the Elders decreed that it was an abomination in the sight of the Creator and ordered it put to death. The carcass was wrapped in sacking and immediately dropped down the disposal trap.”

Rachel said, “I remember. My father whipped me with a harness strap because I said it was a shame the poor calf should be killed.”

“You’re more like me than you are them, Rachel.”

She looked at him seriously, silently.

“Come with me.”

“Will we ever return?”

“When the Ark is saved. The biospheres will again begin to communicate with each other. Cypress Corners will no longer be able to hide beneath its metal sky and false stars.”

She slowly said, “That’s good. I would not want to think that I’d never see Ruth again, or my mother.”

“Not Aram?”

“Most of all, I will miss my father.”

He kissed her. “Then tomorrow.”

Rachel nodded.

“Come back here after nightfall. Bring as much food as you can. Meantime, I’ll slip into the town to find Young Silas, the teacher’s son, and as many others as I think I can trust and convince.”

“I will be here,” she said.

“Remember, your good-byes to your family must be silent.”

“Have faith in my sense,” said Rachel. She gave him a quick, final kiss. “Dawn is too close. Help me with my clothes.”

They shivered in the frosty air.

“I wish I could remember what I began to dream,” said Devon absently.

Rachel straightened and began fastening the buttons of her sleeves. “Do those dreams foretell the future?”

“No. I mean, I don’t think so. Sometimes they seem to give me clues.”

“You have really talked with your parents in the dreams?”

“Yes.”

“Elder Micah preached about such things this past mid-week. He called them witchery.” Devon draped the shawl around her shoulders. “We will forget about Micah. His voice is loud in Cypress Corners, but the sound of it stops at the sky.” He walked with her to the path.

Rachel looked over the valley and said, “It was a good world.”

TWENTY-THREE

They kicked him awake.

Devon started upright, but the quilt wound around his body bound him as effectively as a loop of hemp.

“Watch it—do not let him escape!”

His eyes opened, half-focused, as something slammed the side of his head. Devon sprawled sideways and felt rough pine-bark abrade his face. “Wait—don’t—” He gained his hands and knees, but saw the stout sod-boot coming at him from the side. The boot tip missed his chin but caught him high on the collarbone, flipping him over. Devon looked up at the grim semicircle of adults.

Something salty pooled in the back of his throat; Devon knew it must be blood and he swallowed with difficulty. The breath left him as someone kicked him, in the side.

A voice said, “Enough!”

Devon painfully opened his eyes again. Nearest him, he saw Young Goodman and Esau. Goodman wielded a light metal hoe-handle and tapped it meaningfully on the soil. Esau looked down at Devon and licked his lips. Beside Esau stood Old Martin the shopkeeper, Ahab the fisher, and several others Devon identified as men from the town. A few paces beyond the rest stood Elder Jubal.

“I stay my blows with reluctance,” said a voice close to his head. Devon slowly turned to the side and saw Aram looming above him. In his hands Rachel’s father gripped a scythe so tightly his knuckles whitened. His face held the grimness of an early prophet from the Book.

“Elder Micah will soon arrive,” said Jubal. “Already he and the others have reached the bottom of the slope.”

Aram’s voice was tight with rage. “I defer to the authority of the Elders.” He turned heavily and stalked into the trees.

Devon said, in more of a croak than a proper voice, “I have to tell you—”

“Quiet, madman, witch, or whatever else lies beneath your guise!” Esau delivered a kick which glanced off Devon’s ribcage.

“Esau!”

“Aye, Elder.” Esau backed away reluctantly.

Goodman said maliciously, “What does the Book say about a witch?”

Near Devon’s feet, someone said, “That it shall not be suffered to live.”

“Burning?” said Goodman.

“Stoning?”

“Drowning, I think,” said Old Martin, “in the lake Severity.”

Someone offered, “Why not like the two-headed calf? Confine him without food. When he perishes of starvation, put him down the disposal trap.”

“Put him down the disposal trap alive,” muttered Goodman.

“Good idea.” Ahab echoed the man who had mentioned the fate of the two-headed calf. “His blood will then be on no one’s hands.”

“The disposal trap,” said Goodman, grinning openly. Devon closed his eyes.

“Never have we had to kill a witch,” someone said.

“How do we know Devon is in truth such a demon?” He was met with angry mumbling. Thereafter Devon wondered at the identity of the single skeptic; he never discovered it.

“Brothers!” Jubal’s scolding tone.

Feet-tramping sounds, other voices, approached.

“Where be the whelp?” The voice of Elder Micah.

“Yonder, beneath the pine.”

Closer, the sounds of the new arrivals.

“Open thine eyes to me, Devon,” said Micah quietly.

One eye opened more easily than the other, Devon discovered. The somber image of the Elder wavered for a moment. “Canst thou see?”

“Yes,” said Devon.

Aram returned from his sojourn alone among the trees. He cradled the scythe in one arm as he looked down at Devon. Aram spat on the ground, the spittle missing Devon’s ear by millimeters. “This one is fortunate I did not climb up here unaccompanied.”

Micah regarded the welts and bruises, and the congealing blood which made a mask of half Devon’s face. “He appears not to have escaped some retribution.”

Aram said bitterly, “He is fortunate to be still among the living.” He shifted the scythe to the other arm. In the morning light, the honed edge reflected fire. “Were I alone, I would have reaped his life.”

“Thou hast done the proper thing,” said Micah. “The Creator would be displeased were there blood—even demon blood—solely on thy hands.”

Aram slowly nodded, but his gaze never left Devon’s throat.

“Be thy family well?” said Micah.

“Aye.”

“And thy daughter?”

Color rose in to the farmer’s cheeks. “Aye, well enough. I beat her when I found her creeping in from the hills. For a while, then, she slunk around the house like a dog caught sneaking food from the kitchen table.”

Micah looked significantly toward Devon. “Be that all the hurt?”

"I do not know," said Aram, looking at the ground. "She admitted nothing. I've left her in the custody of her mother."

"Be not downcast," said Micah. "Thy daughter be untainted in the eyes of the Creator. Whatever filth dwelleth in her shall depart with the exorcism of mad Devon." From the ground, Devon said, "Do not speak that way about Rachel."

Elder Micah glanced at Young Goodman. Goodman nodded slightly and kicked Devon in the stomach. Devon doubled over, retching.

"It is my shame," said Aram.

"No." Micah shook his head and raised his voice so all could hear. "It be a shame upon the land; and thus shalt the land itself expel that shame."

Devon forced out the words hoarsely, "I must tell..." Micah looked down; Devon saw no mercy in the impassive face. "Thou wilt say naught, child of evil. Thy fate awaits thee."

"Listen to me... I have to tell you about the Ark." The Elder inexorably continued: "We do what must be done to *any* who blasphemes and brings evil and rancor to our people. Thou wilt be tried and punished as befits your crimes."

Devon said faintly, "No... the destruction will come if..."

Micah spoke to Goodman. "Remove thy neckerchief and make of it a gag. There be deadly danger in even listening to this sacrilege."

Young Goodman took pleasure in jamming open Devon's jaws with the metal hoe-handle so that he could insert the wadded-up cloth. Devon started to struggle but was easily secured by two of the other men. "He'll speak no more words of heresy, Elder."

Micah faintly smiled his approval. "Then let us hasten back to the town. With the guidance of the Book, we shall excise this sty upon our vision."

The men gathered to depart the hill; there was a problem of logistics with the prisoner. "How should we carry him?" someone said.

"Use the quilt," said Aram. "It's now too soiled for any other purpose."

They wrapped Devon in the comforter. One on either end, a third man with his arm wrapped around Devon's middle, they carried him like a slack sack of grain down the hill. Dead weight being hard to haul, they traded off every half-kilometer.

Young Goodman took his turn with Esau and Ahab. From one end of the burden, Goodman said too low for Micah to hear, "Too bad there's not a disposal trap in the hills. It would save us much sweat."

Ahab looked at him curiously. "It is one thing to hate a witch or heretic... that is a rightful rage. But your hatred stalks beyond even righteousness. Why?"

Goodman said nothing.

Esau tittered. "I fear Brother Goodman has his own small sacrilege with which to contend."

"Shut up, Esau."

"What's the matter?" said Esau. "Do you think no one knows?"

Goodman scowled and said nothing.

Esau said to Ahab, "There are stories men tell each other—you know... like after meetings, or on a stack in between loads of hay. But these stories aren't parables out of the Book."

Ahab nodded.

"Well," said Esau, "there's a story about two men who wished to lie with the same girl."

"For the Creator's sake, keep your voice down." Goodman looked nervously at Elder Micah, leading the procession.

"Two men..." Ahab looked significantly down at the wrapped bundle that was Devon.

Esau said, "Well, we don't know for *sure*, but—"

"And the other man?"

Esau only tittered again; Goodman's cheeks flushed red.

"It is indeed a sacrilege," said Ahab. "Rachel should open only to her husband, and that husband will be Young Garth."

"Brother Goodman holds little affection for Young Garth as well. Our new smith once interrupted a game we were playing with the Young Devon."

"Your story is most unpleasant," said Ahab. He turned his head to see who followed close behind. "My leg hurts me. Brother Martin? Will you carry this burden for a while?" He handed one end of the prisoner over to the shopkeeper; then let the rest of the file of men pass him by.

"It's a more amusing story than most in the Book," said Esau.

"Still thy tongue!" said Goodman, assuming the cant of the Elders.

Esau's smile froze and died by millimeters. "Of course, Brother. I never meant to offend."

Old Martin looked curiously between the two of them. "What did you say?"

Young Goodman answered for Esau. Lips twisted in a feral grimace, he said, "Nothing."

TWENTY-FOUR

Young Silas the teacher read again the request that had been relayed to him from the Elders. He folded the paper in half, and then again, halving it until the paper was a small bundle too thick to fold. Then he slipped the message into the breast pocket of his overalls.

He walked to the door of the school. It was recess; his fourteen students were busily tending the garden plots surrounding the building. Spading, weeding, thinning, watering, the children toiled industriously along their individually assigned rows. The vegetables here were often better than the produce from most of the outlying farms. *Prideful thought*, and so he crushed it, but Silas still reflected to himself that he was a good teacher.

"Reuben!" he called. "Leah! Hiram!" The rest of their names. "Come here."

They came to him obediently and waited to find out what it was he wished of them. His students were all younger than thirteen cycles.

Young Hiram, one of the youngest, whispered something to his neighbor. Behind him, eleven-cycle-old Leah jabbed him in the ribs. Silas pretended not to notice.

When all were assembled, the oldest, Young Reuben, said, "Yes, Master Silas?"

"We will not be working exercises in numbers for the remainder of the day," he said. The younger students hid half-suppressed smiles of relief. "Several hours yet remain to the afternoon. We have been assigned a very special task by the Elders."

That raised a small stir. Young Reuben said, "What is the task, sir?"

Silas felt the folded paper in his pocket; it exerted pressure against the skin of his chest. "We are to gather a heap of stones."

"Stones, sir?"

He hesitated and decided not to explain. If he had been as good a teacher as he thought himself to be, they would not ask. "Yes. As many as you can find."

"How big, sir?"

What *would* be required? "No lighter than about a half-kilo, no heavier than three."

"How many, sir?"

"As many as you can find."

"Any special kind, sir?"

"No... any kind. Just stones."

He dismissed them and they scattered like a covey of surprised quail. Not quite like quail, he reflected. The children were silent and solemnly intent. Silas turned and retreated into the school. It was an

echoing barn of a structure with rows of metal desks bolted to the floor and the single table located at the front. He sat down stiffly behind the table. In back of him, the blackboard held the neatly chalked columns of the multiplication tables. There were no other decorations on the walls.

“Sir?” It was Young Reuben with the first returns. “Where shall I put them?”

“By the steps,” said Silas. “Others will be along later to collect them.”

Young Reuben hefted a rock the size of his doubled fists. “This one glitters, sir.”

Silas didn’t look. “Pyrites. Fool’s gold.”

All afternoon the children radiated out and returned, like ants laboring to supply their mound. Toward dusk, Elder Jubal appeared at the schoolhouse door.

“Master Silas?”

The teacher looked up from the blank sweep of desk. “Elder Jubal.”

The children followed the portly Elder into the classroom. “It’s almost dark, sir,” said Reuben. “Have we brought enough stones?”

Jubal smiled and said, “You’ve all done well. It’s a fine collection of stones.” Then he spoke directly to the teacher: “Master Silas, will you come now to the Place of Worship? The trial is about to begin.”

TWENTY-FIVE

When the men unwrapped him at the penalty shed, Devon had rolled onto the hard floor and lain there too weak even to pull the gag from his mouth. He had nearly suffocated. His left eye was swollen shut. When he tried to move, his limbs twitched like the body of a gaffed fish.

Young Goodman bent down to retrieve his neckerchief. He held the cloth by one corner, examining it critically. "This Devon soils everything he touches." He let the cloth flutter back to the floor.

Devon managed to get to his knees; some of the men backed away.

"He is a viper without fangs," said Micah. "Fear him not. Long before new fangs grow, he shall meet his fate."

Aram said, "Soon, Elder?"

"When the sun hast set," Micah told them, "all thee shalt gather in the Place of Worship. Then wilt thee know the disposal of this sinful child."

The men began to file out of the shed. Micah was the last to depart. He knelt and stared into Devon's one functioning eye. "Thinkest thou well on thy sins; I fear thee hast passed the point of all redemption." He stared for a few seconds longer and then stood.

Elder Jubal brought a brimming pail to the door of the shed. "A bucket of water, Elder, as you requested."

"Set it inside."

It was done; Jubal followed Micah from the shed and swung the door shut. Micah slipped the hasp over the staple and secured it with a heavy padlock. Then he spoke to Devon through the metal mesh. "The water be the bounty of our charity, Devon. Drink, wash with it, do what thou wilt."

The two Elders walked away.

Devon scabbled on hands and knees to the bucket and buried his face in the cold water. After he had drunk his fill, he tore loose a piece of his tattered shirt and used it to bathe his wounds. He now had the time and opportunity to assess the damage: his limbs moved, there seemed to be no broken bones. The bruises and abrasions, on examination, all appeared to be superficial. He wrung the water out of the rag and folded a compress for his swollen eye. Then he sagged back against the wall to rest.

The penalty shed was seldom used for its appointed purpose; there were few transgressors in Cypress Corners. The stout square hut, with its windows and door of heavy metal mesh, had last been used as an impromptu zoo cage. Devon could smell the pungent odor of big cat. The hill cat, one of the few remaining, had been so unwise as to give

up the killing of surplus deer in favor of the easier course of preying on the goats and pigs of the farms. Old Ahab had cleverly managed to catch the beast, using a trap of specially strengthened seine. When he brought his captive into town, folk flocked around the wagon and stared. Then he backed the wagon to the door of the penalty shed and prodded the big cat until it leaped inside with one lithe bound.

The cat remained a novel attraction until the annoyed Elders deemed it a nuisance. It was decreed unseemly for so many citizens to loiter staring around the makeshift cage. The aid of Young Goodman and a few others was enlisted. The young men used sharpened poles to pierce the animal until it died.

Goodman requested the pelt of the dead beast, but his petition was denied. It was rumored that despite the decision of the Elders, the hill cat went down the disposal trap without its fur. A further rumor suggested that a piece of sensual contraband remained hidden in an unspecified loft, brought out and fondled only at night.

The smell of the hill cat lingered and cloyed in Devon's nostrils. He remembered it pacing the inside of the shed in endless, restless circuits. *And when my body is sent down the trap, will Goodman then keep yet another trophy?* The thought disturbed him.

Shadows lengthened across the floor of the shed. He knew that frame by frame, the sun was following its track down to the west. That meant he soon would face the implacable eyes of the Elders in the Place of Worship. *Rachel, have they hurt you?* He expected no answer and none came. He hoped Rachel would not be at the Place of Worship.

"Are you at peace, boy?"

Devon looked up and saw Jubal accompanied by two other men beyond the door. He knew the two men were to support him if he could not walk; to constrain him if he tried to flee.

"It is past sunset," said Jubal, fumbling with the padlock. "Time for your trial."

"What trial? The verdict is preordained." Devon mildly surprised himself by tottering to his feet.

"Throw yourself on the mercy of the Elders, lad." Jubal finally got the door open. The other two men entered and took Devon's elbows.

"You know better, Elder Jubal."

Jubal looked away. "The Creator is merciful."

TWENTY-SIX

Devon could nearly walk unaided when they arrived at the Place of Worship. The double doors of the hall gaped open, spilling a fan of light into the new darkness. *One last appeal*, he thought. *Beg, and take whatever crumbs are thrown. Use them for time; perhaps someone will listen.*

It was much like the last time he had been led here in answer to the Elders' summons. This time the congregation was perfectly silent; even the smallest children did not fidget. Ten Elders were seated in a row along the rear of the platform. Elder Micah stood waiting like a raven with folded wings behind the lectern. The Creator's machine projected from the lectern top.

Devon's two escorts released him and took stations by the doors. Elder Jubal took his arm and conducted him slowly up the aisle. *It is*, he thought, *very much like a funeral.*

He glanced from side to side. Rachel with her family, Garth with his, all were seated in the front pews. He met Rachel's eyes as he passed; she shook her head mutely.

"Stand before us, Devon." Micah's voice seemed to echo in the cavernous hall. Devon looked up at him from below the lectern. He could hear a slight hum from the Creator's machine.

"Hear the charges against thee, Devon. Thy list of offenses be long and diverse." Micah read from a sheet of paper: "Witchery, heresy, sacrilege both petty and major, flouting the authority of the Elders, physically assaulting two of those same Elders, theft of a holy relic..." He looked up from the list. "There be more of varying degrees of heinousness. Must I continue? The point be plain that thou art a creature utterly devoid of moral scruple. Thou hast flaunted thy impiety and for good reason. I know not whether thee be mad or possessed, but each be as reprehensible as the other in the eyes of the Creator." Micah's indictment ended on a rising note and he paused. The silence stretched until Micah stabbed a finger down at Devon. "It be not our place to pass judgment on one such as thee. Trespasses such as thine can be judged only by a compassion the magnitude of the Creator's."

Devon knew what would happen next; he *knew*. Yet he could not speak out in reply. He felt as though he were a bird mesmerized before a hungry snake.

Micah inclined his head and spoke into the grille of the Creator's machine: "Respond to my voice, O Lord of Hosts. We beseech Thee to pass Thy judgment upon this sorry child of sin who standeth before Thee now."

Silence for a moment as the Creator considered the supplication. Devon turned to face the congregation.

Hie voice of the Creator thundered through the Place of Worship. "Analysis of evidence presented in prosecution of factor coded: Devon computes in name of the Creator. Decision: final elimination of factor from gene pool, effective instantest."

The echoes slowly died. Devon turned his head and saw the brief smile of final, terrible triumph. The Elder's features settled to a mask of sternness. He looked from Devon to the congregation. "Ye have heard the Voice of the Creator."

At last Devon broke the paralysis that had bound his tongue. "Let me speak! I wish to be heard!"

The Elders shouted him down, Jubal leading the pack. Louder than the rest, Micah said, "From the mouth of an heretic we will hear no further words of dissension and wickedness!"

"Wait!" The word was shouted from the congregation.

Micah raised his head incredulously. "Who spoke?"

"Me." Young Garth slowly stood. The rest of the congregation gradually quieted. Garth looked from congregation to Elders and his face was troubled. When he spoke, his words stumbled. "As, uh, as a principal in this thing, as one slurred by Dev—uh, by the accused, I request he be heard. Every man should have his say."

Face radish-red, Young Garth sat down. His father set a hand on his arm. Old Garth looked startled, but clearly pleased.

Micah glanced at Devon and then at the congregation; he took a quick estimate of the situation. He said to the crowd, "Is it thy will?"

The congregation took collective stock of itself. The men looked at one another and exchanged hushed opinions. Most of the women remained silent. Devon searched among their faces for allies. Face still pink, Young Garth stared down at the floor. Halfway back to the rear, Old Esther openly wept. Devon picked out Young Silas among the crowd. The teacher's eye evaded capture like a hare darting for a thicket. Silas looked in any direction save Devon's, as though others might accuse him of infection from a subtle contamination; no help there. In the front pew, Rachel said a few pleading words to her father, then argumentatively added something else. Aram spoke back harshly, and Rachel turned to her mother. Old Rachel shook her head silently. Devon saw Esau and Goodman gloating in the second pew; no help there either.

Gradually a consensus of agreement grew. Several, then most of the crowd called out, "Aye, let him be heard." Micah accepted the verdict expressionlessly. "Be it upon thy heads," he said. Then he addressed Devon: "Young Garth hath spoken out for thee. Let thy calumny against him be in thy heart as thee meet thy reward." He paused.

“Speak, if thou wilt.”

Devon took a deep breath. *How can I tell them? How will they understand?* Hopelessly, he began: “This world of Cypress Corners, that you take to be only a hundred kilometers across... it is more than that. It is part of a greater whole, an even larger world. We are but one world among many, hundreds of others. All joined on a great Ark of space, moving through a greater universe of other suns and moons and worlds and emptiness; on a journey planned five hundred cycles ago—”

“Stop! I will hear no more of this.” Micah stepped down from the platform and soundly slapped Devon’s face. “Thy outrages of heresy go beyond bounds of mercy.”

Devon rocked with the impact of the slaps, yet somehow stayed erect. He swayed, but raised his voice above the confused, background babble of the congregation. “We are in a ship, a great ship built by *people*. Not the Creator, not a god in the machine, but *people*, like us. Our ancestors who tried to save us from the death of the Earth...”

“No more!” Micah glared at the prisoner. He spoke in a cold fury. “Thou hast heard the Voice of the Creator; the verdict be clear. We are bound but to obey. Let this child of darkness be taken from the Place of Worship and stoned to death. A place has been prepared beyond the school.”

Devon stared back, not yet fully comprehending what the Elder had said.

! Nor had others in the congregation. “*Stoned to death?*” someone said. The voice was appalled. They had all read of stonings in the Book, yet none had ever seen, much less participated in one. “*Stoning?*”

Elder Micah broke the crowd’s paralysis: “The Creator has decreed it!” He turned to the other Elders and shouted, “Take him! Take him now!” They swarmed across the platform like somber, aged birds of prey and enclosed Devon within a dark ring of bodies.

Devon’s voice rose above the knot as he shouted: “I’ve seen it! I’ve been there, outside Cypress Corners, outside this world. I’ve been there and come back... and we’re doomed, we’ll all die if we don’t—”

“Silence!” Elder Micah screamed. Devon struggled in the grip of the Elders as they pummeled him with ancient fists. Micah swung his fist with all the strength he could muster; the knuckles connected with the tip of Devon’s jaw. The young man sagged toward the floor.

Elder Micah stepped back, panting with exertion. He turned and glared at the congregation. “You see now,” he said. “You *see*. It be as the the Creator hath said. Devon hath come amongst us a devil-spawn, a demon himself, to corrupt us—” He stared at Young Rachel. “To plot against us, to defy the Maker’s will. Thou hast heard the heresy. Now

canst anyone not agree with the decree of the Creator?"

"No," said Aram vehemently.

"No!" shouted Esau and Goodman. Others joined the cry.

Garth and Rachel stared in horror at each other.

"Hear me," said Micah. "When Devon regaineth his senses, he shall be conducted to the penalty shed for the remainder of the night. At first light, the stones of the land will end his vileness for all and good. Now go and ponder the wickedness thee must expiate from among thyselfes."

The now-aroused congregation arose as one and, for the first time in living memory, departed the Place of Worship in anything but an orderly fashion.

Garth and Rachel, with their families, followed more slowly.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Long after Old Sarah had gone to bed, Garth and his father sat looking at each other across the kitchen table. The unsteady flame of the lantern cast Old Garth's face in a harsh, unforgiving relief. *How old he's become*, thought his son, sadly marveling. *Why have I not noticed before?*

The dark pouches beneath his eyes, every crease and wrinkle in the weathered skin, the sagging facial muscles, all revealed themselves to Young Garth's eyes. *It must have happened slowly, but I just didn't see. Some day I'll look the same as him and my son will stare at me this way. I'm looking at my own face.*

The older man spoke. "Your pain touches me, Son."

"What, Father?" Garth jerked out of his reverie.

"Your pain—I felt it when you spoke for Devon in the Place of Worship. I can feel it now."

Garth pictured Micah's face after the Elder struck Devon to the floor. "I do not hate Devon, Father."

"It should be so. He was your friend all through your childhood."

Garth hesitated, then said painfully, "I cannot take part in the stoning."

His father looked down at the table for a long time, until Garth wondered if he were asleep. Then the old man raised his head and said slowly, "Consider your family's honor, Son, and your own."

"I cannot help kill him," Garth said obstinately. "Please be with me in this."

"Is there more you would tell me? Things I must know to support you in this break with the oldest traditions?"

"I do not love Rachel, Father. I have never loved her." The old man considered the statement. "You both were promised at birth. The pronouncement of the Creator's machine was taken. Your will must play no part in this."

"It has to, Father."

"But why?" His father's voice was anguished. "Why?"

"Father, Rachel loves Devon. I have known this always. And he would die for her—and will, at first light. How can I stand between them when I care nothing for Rachel save as friend?" He had to force the words out, knowing they bore barbs which pierced his father. "Is this not evil, too, Father? Please. I must know."

Old Garth steepled his fingers. "We are told, my son. We are told by those who know how best we should live. By the Elders who listen to the voice of the Creator's machine, who care for us and make our yield full and our lives pure. We must listen to them, Garth."

"Then I will marry Rachel," said Garth, "and Devon will die for loving her."

"Devon will die," said his father, "for heresy and his other crimes against all of us."

"Father, no crime was committed against me."

"No crime? To seek to lie with your woman?"

"Not *my* woman..." He shook his head exasperatedly.

"There is still," said Old Garth, "the matter of honor."

"Not mine, Father. I honor Devon as friend."

"That of your family, then?"

Garth looked away stonily.

The old man said slowly, "There is a problem most often faced by the young. The time comes when one realizes that what he wishes to do and what he *must* do may not both be accomplished."

"I want to do *right*, Father."

"I, too, want you to do right."

"Then must I choose between honors?"

"If that is the Creator's will, yes."

"But *how*?" Garth brought his fists down hard on the table.

"Does it matter?" said Old Garth. "Regardless of how you reconcile your own soul, Devon will die at first light."

"It matters to *me*."

"Then heed," said his father. "There was a time once when I set a box snare for weasels. For entire weeks I caught nothing so I neglected the trap. But one morning I chanced upon it and saw the snare had been tripped. When I lifted the box, I found a live, snarling female weasel. Beside her were the mostly eaten remains of a male. The two had been trapped together."

"So?" Garth said.

"Be patient. The point is that inside that special limitation of the box, both creatures could not exist; and there came the time when one had to be sacrificed, else both would die. So it is with your passion and your obligations."

"I hate that story," said Garth.

Father and son stared at each other for a long moment; then Old Garth began to smile. The tension between them dropped away as he got up and walked around the table to his son. "So do I," he said. "I never could find a good time to use it." Old Garth placed his hands on his son's shoulders. "You must make your own choices; it is not my place to make them for you."

Garth stood up and faced his father.

"Perhaps you should go to speak to Devon," said Old Garth. "It might ease your pain."

They embraced then; a sad, rough love flowed between them.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The Elder Micah visited Devon in the penalty shed hours after Jubal had returned the prisoner and padlocked the door. Devon sat by the door, watching the approaching lantern bob through the darkness. When he saw whose face was reflected in the yellow light, he said flatly, "You."

"Yes," said Micah, looking down at him through the mesh of the door. "I."

"Why am I not guarded? You're the first I've seen since Jubal and the others went."

"I hardly think you can escape," said Micah quietly. "As to why no one guards you—it has been a very long time since anyone was stoned to death in Cypress Corners. It is a harsh death. Most do not care to see you until the appointed time comes 'round.'"

"Why don't you talk like an Elder?" said Devon.

"I do not come here now as an Elder. I am a man who comes to the penalty shed, a very old and tired man."

Devon looked at Micah unbelievably. He had seldom heard an Elder speak this way. "What do you want?"

Micah hesitated. "Nothing. Only to speak with you for a while."

They remained then in silence with the metal netting between them. Micah cleared his throat.

"Where is Rachel?" Devon said.

"At home, I imagine. With her family."

"She hasn't been harmed?"

Micah said mildly, "She is to become the wife of Young Garth. Rachel will suffer no hurt."

"I want nothing to happen to her on my account."

"Your taint will be expunged only with time, Devon. The Creator is patient and merciful. Young Rachel will be offered every chance."

Devon's body drooped with fatigue. "This night is endless."

"It only seems so to one who has not meditated upon his own folly."

"I've heard that sermon, Elder Micah." His voice was weary.

"Yet you never heeded; not when you first were directed into the hills; not upon your summons and return; not even now. Devon, you are a fool. Worse, an unrepentant fool."

"How can I repent?" said Devon. "I have seen what I have seen, done what I have done."

Micah did not answer. A night bird cried out in the woods beyond the town.

"All those things I said in the Place of Worship are true. Perhaps they're heresy, but I experienced them. I've been beyond this world

and returned. Why can't you bend from your blindness for just a few moments and believe me?"

The Elder hesitated before replying. "I can believe you."

Devon slowly raised his head and looked at the Elder.

"Yes," said Micah.

"Then why—" Devon spread his hands to indicate the penalty shed, the town, the entire world of Cypress Corners.—why *this*?

"Does it require an answer, boy? Were your childhood lessons so neglected that you require an explanation of the obvious?"

"It isn't obvious," said Devon. "There's no reason for the people not to discover that their world is only one among many, that their universe isn't bound by a metal sky. There's no reason for them to be forbidden to ask questions."

Micah said, "Stop. Again you overlook what is real." Devon stared at him questioningly.

"*This* is real." Micah's hand stabbed down at the earth. "And that." He indicated the sky. "Regardless of what exists beyond, Cypress Corners is a handiwork unto itself. Let other men concern themselves with worlds that lie far from here; our concerns must be with this one. The Maker's ideal is order, patterns out of chaos." His features betrayed pain. "You see how woefully distant we have strayed from the ideal here in this small world. Can you imagine the incalculable damage should the universe be extended for us? No one may properly till the fields whose home is not in order."

"There will be no homes to keep in order," said Devon, "no fields to till, unless this great Ark in which we ride is preserved from destruction. That's simple truth." Micah shook his head. "If this Ark, as you call it, is to be preserved, then the Creator will see to it. You say there are hundreds of other worlds like Cypress Corners. Then it follows that there must be uncountable numbers of men who can repair this ship of yours. Let them do it and let us be unaffected."

"But none of them know—" said Devon.

"Only you?" Micah's eyebrows lifted. "Only *you*, Devon? There is a name for you, boy—it is megalomaniac." Devon turned away in disgust.

"At first I wondered if we might be too harsh on you, boy." Micah's voice rose. "Now I wonder if this stringent punishment at first light might yet be too lenient. You are no more tractable than was your father—"

Devon interrupted him. "My father?"

"Old Devon," confirmed Micah, lips drawing back into tight white lines. "The dissident, the warlock, the—" He nearly spat the words. "—question-asker."

Devon stood up and put his palms against the mesh. "No one ever

spoke those things of my father.”

Micah’s eyes seemed to glitter in the lantern-light. “No one knew, save me. He came to me with his ungodly confessions, thinking I could be gulled into helping; but I recognized the heresies. The Creator granted me clear sight.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Witchery, lad. Old Devon and his mad visions of sights unseen by other men, his peepings into distant minds, dreams—”

“Dreams!” Devon cried. “He could travel in his dreams?”

“Aye,” said Micah. “To hell and back again. And it was to hell one-way that I finally sent him.” The Elder pressed his face close to the mesh and stared into Devon’s eyes. “You were to accompany the hell-spawn and his mate, yet somehow the Creator spared you. I thought that there must be a reason, that some way you might be redeemed. But I was wrong; you carried your father’s stigma all the while—”

“The fire.” The realization grew and flowered inside Devon’s mind. “You killed them!” He flung himself against the metal door; it flexed outward only slightly. He tore futilely at the screen as Micah backed away.

“Aye,” the Elder said. “It was the Creator’s work.”

“Murderer.”

Micah stooped to pick up the lantern. “The remaining night is short; you would use it to advantage to repent.”

“I will not.”

“Then lad, I leave you in peace to ponder your own thoughts. I shall see you at first light with Garth, Rachel, and the others.”

Devon’s voice was anguished. “Not Rachel.”

“But she is the most aggrieved party, Devon.” As he turned to depart, Micah added, “It is she who must cast the first stone.”

TWENTY-NINE

Sometime in the black limbo between moonset and dawn, Devon heard a sound and came fully awake. There had been no true sleep; it had been a time of dozing, punctuated by waking nightmares.

The sound.... *Repeated.* It was the harsh rattle of metal against metal. Devon lifted his head, raised himself on his elbows. The noise seemed to come from the screened window opposite the door of the penalty shed.

Devon called out. "Is someone there?" No one answered.

He heard the tortured screech of wrenching metal. Then there was a crash as the wire-mesh window was ripped completely out of its frame.

"Who is it?" Still no answer.

Devon got up and crossed to the newly unblocked window. The night wind poured a cold draft into his face. "Who is it?" he repeated. He could see little in the starlight, but he was sure nothing moved behind the penalty shed.

The lower casing was even with his chest. It took him four tries before he balanced with his hands on the casing and his upper body protruding out of the window. Feeling suddenly weak and knowing no more graceful way to escape the shed, he simply let his body topple forward. It was several meters to the ground, and he landed primarily on the shoulder he had bruised in the bounce tube.

Devon lay quiet for a while, coping with the pain. Then he got to hands and knees. He toughed something cold—it was the metal mesh, one corner curled back where the screen had been pried from the casing.

"Garth?" Devon whispered. At first he could think of no one else who might have torn loose the screen. Yet, he thought, anyone with a pry bar could compensate for not possessing brute strength. Who, then? Could Rachel have escaped her family's confinement? Might Young Silas the Teacher have at last found his courage? Even old Granny Esther, given a long enough lever, could have loosened the mesh. "Are you still there?" he said. There was no response from the darkness; Devon felt instinctively that he was alone.

He got to his feet, using the wall of the shed for support. With the moon down, he was unsure how close morning lay. After a brief respite to regain his breath, Devon slipped away from Cypress Corners. The deeper shadows provided complete concealment. He encountered no one as he threaded his way through the town.

Once beyond the last dark buildings, Devon circled until he found the road he wanted, the route that led toward Aram's farm.

The first edge of the sun flickered below the eastern horizon as the congregation gathered restlessly in front of the schoolhouse. It was a crisp autumn morning, the sort that fogged one's breath. Some of the smaller children blew plumes at one another until the adults cuffed them.

Another kind of cloud hung over the assembled citizens; there was a collective confusion, a wary apprehension abroad this morning. The congregation was not so much a mob as it was a crowd waiting to be led.

Elder Micah stood with the other members of the Council beside the heap of stones. The sun sprang a halfframe above the hills. Micah said, "Bring the heretic to meet his fate."

Jubal and two others moved off quickly toward the penalty shed.

Micah surveyed the congregation. "Where is Young Rachel?"

Granny Esther came forward. "Aram and Old Rachel are fetching her."

"Why is she not here now?"

The old woman hesitated, slightly embarrassed. "This is difficult for her, Elder Micah. She, like us, has ne'er seen a stoning, much less helped with one."

Micah raised his voice wrathfully. "Dost thou see, all! Dost thou see the seeds of impiety planted by this feckless child, Devon? Tonight we pray longer, lest the wickedness take root in us all!"

Young Goodman said, "Elder Micah, may we now take up stones?"

The Elder nodded. "Choose thee well."

The congregation began to file past the heap of stones. Goodman and Esau picked through the rocks until they found jagged, fist-sized missiles. Granny Esther took in hand the smallest, smoothest pebble she could find.

"Elder Micah!" Jubal pushed through the crowd. "He be gone!"

"Gone?" said Micah. "How gone, how?"

"The window be torn loose. He has fled." Jubal stood there panting, unsure what to say next, afraid he would somehow be assigned blame.

Micah said, "Found him once did we... find him again we shall."

"Surely he will not return to the same hill," said Jubal.

The congregation milled in confusion. Closely followed by Jubal, Micah pushed his way through the crowd until he found Garth standing with his parents. "Young Garth, bearest thy crossbow this morn?"

"It is at the smithy," said Garth.

"Then fetch it and be quick, lad." As Garth turned away, Micah raised his voice to the other men. "Fetch weapons, all! Cudgels, staves, scythes, whatever thee possess."

"But where search first?" said Jubal.

Micah smiled with no trace of humor. "I believe I know where to guide thee."

Aram conducted his family along the road to Cypress Corners by dint of will and his strong, farmer's body. Old Rachel and Ruth wailed and walked behind, younger daughter taking her mother's cue. Aram gripped the arm of his other daughter as tightly as if she were a recalcitrant calf. Young Rachel twisted futilely, trying to jerk free. Her father alternately called down the Creator's curses upon the head of Devon and berated Rachel in the Elders' cant:

"Most spiteful daughter! Come! Thy foolishness wilt not cast thy father and mother in contempt in the eyes of the congregation."

"Father, *please*, no, Father, please! I will not stone Devon!" Rachel stumbled and almost fell as she tried to twist free; her long dress was already caked with road dust. Aram jerked her erect and cocked back his arm.

"I have no wish to hurt thee," he said.

"Then do not, Aram."

Aram recognized the voice and slowly turned. Devon emerged from the chokecherry bushes lining that stretch of roadway. Young Rachel stared; Ruth stopped snuffling; Old Rachel let out a gasp of fear.

"How be it *thou* art here?" Aram stepped in front of his family to protect them from the madman.

"I think you know," said Devon. "I'm going to take Rachel away."

Aram stepped forward. "This be not the stoning, Devon, but I wilt kill thee anyway. Stand away!"

"No." He looked beyond her father's broad shoulder. "Rachel, will you come?"

"I will, Devon." There was no hesitation.

Aram turned and stared at her. "I should slay thee as well. Thou betrayest—"

"Let her go, Aram." Devon was inwardly surprised that his words were steady; he had feared the raw fury of this man. But now there was an overriding reason to break that fear.

Aram swung back to Devon and leaped. Devon had the advantage of youth, but he was exhausted. The two men grappled and rolled in the dust while Old Rachel began again to wail. Rachel put her arms around her mother.

"—kill you," Aram grunted, reaching with his thumbs for Devon's eyes. Devon twisted his head aside. He managed to unbalance Aram and the farmer toppled to the side, striking his head against a rock. Aram's arms slackened for a moment, and Devon found his fingers around the man's throat. Aram's face was also Micah's and he wanted

to kill them both. He steadily squeezed.

“Devon, do not hurt him.” Her voice finally penetrated his rage, and he took his hands away from Aram’s neck. Choking sounds came from the farmer’s throat; Aram rolled his head back and forth weakly, fingers massaging the red welts.

Devon got up unsteadily and Young Rachel held him. Ruth and Old Rachel, now mute, stood watching. “I wanted to kill him,” Devon said unbelievably.

“But you did not.” She knelt beside her father and lightly kissed him. Aram glared, but continued to lie there gasping for breath.

Rachel turned to her mother and sister and kissed them both. She gave Old Rachel an extra hug. “Perhaps I’ll see you all again someday,” she said. “Tend Father well.” Then she took Devon’s hand. Now?

“Toward the hills,” Devon said.

A smaller party of pursuers forged ahead of the mob. Micah was in the forefront, pressing his elderly body to its limits. He ignored the pain burning in his chest, paid no heed to the aching lungs and pulse that threatened to drown the sound of air rasping in and out of his throat.

Jubal, flushed and sweating, scarcely younger than Micah himself, trotted beside him. The second Elder appeared ready to collapse at any moment.

Behind Jubal ran Young Goodman, the jagged stone still clutched in one fist, stout oak stave in the other. Beside Goodman was Garth, swinging the crossbow lightly from his right hand.

“Look!” The others followed Jubal’s outstretched arm and saw two distant figures dodge into the trees beyond the edge of a meadow.

Micah gasped out the words a few at a time: “I knew! They made for the woods where we tracked Devon from Aram’s farm.”

“The grove where we heard the strange howling?” said Goodman.

“Aye.”

As though on cue, they heard the keening wail start up from the trees ahead.

“It is but Devon’s trickery,” said Micah.

The whine cycled higher in pitch.

Goodman said, “Look at that!”

Despite the morning sunlight flooding the valley, a patch of woods was illuminated with a bright blue radiance. The pursuers hesitated in mid-meadow.

“I see them,” said Jubal. “Come on!” In the center of the blue glow, two human figures crouched, waiting beneath the trees.

“Garth!” said Micah. “Your bow.”

Garth reversed the crossbow in his hands. He knelt and, using his foot, cocked it. He slapped a short, heavy quarrel onto the grooved stock.

Micah said, "Now!"

The quarrel hummed away from the bow and passed barely above the distant Devon's head. The radiance peaked in brightness. Devon and Rachel seemed to drop from sight.

"They're hiding," Jubal guessed.

They stumbled into the thicket as the iris began to close. "Stop it!" Micah screamed.

It was not in jest that Goodman had often been called "Young Micah." Without stopping to think, he obeyed the Elder's command, leaping at the iris as though human flesh could stop the closing metal flower. Only his right hand and wrist reached the center of the iris before the gateway was again solid. The sound was that of a gardener clipping a weed. For one painless moment of shock, Goodman stared at the end of his truncated arm. He began to scream as blood spurted onto the dull metal disc.

Elder Micah blindly thrust his protege aside and stood above the closed portal with legs apart and fists clenched. His voice was low and hoarse. "I curse thee, Devon! In the name of the Maker, I curse—" His voice broke and he looked surprised. Half-turning, he groped toward the others in the party. "Elder Jubal, the pain, I—" His face twisted in agony. Micah's knees betrayed him and he collapsed.

Jubal knelt beside the body of his colleague and felt for a pulse. He slowly got back to his feet, saying, "My brother is dead."

Garth was wrapping his shirt around the stump of the whimpering Goodman's arm. He looked up at Jubal and shook his head.

Jubal surveyed the men: dead, maimed, or alive. He absently stooped to examine the control mechanism of the portal. Finally he stood and turned to Garth who was adjusting a tourniquet. "I know this be Devon's means of escape." He picked up a handful of leaves and dropped them on the half-hidden disc. He murmured a prayer, then said, "Help me move the Elder's body; then we will make this place again secret, lest it become a temptation to others."

"Goodman still needs my aid," said Garth.

Jubal said, "Yes, of course." He reached down to tug the Elder's body off the disc. He avoided looking at Micah's face, the mouth frozen in the snarling rictus of a dog that has been kicked to death.

Bathed by the blue light, Devon and Rachel sailed at constant speed through the gravityless bounce tube. Hands joined, they orbited around a common point.

Against the wind, Rachel said, "How long is the journey?"

“To where?”

“Wherever.”

“It’s considerable,” said Devon, “but not nearly so long as the one we’ve already completed.”

“Will they pursue us?”

Devon said, “I doubt it. It’s possible they won’t even discover the iris; if they do, Jubal and Micah won’t want to disclose the existence of an outside world to the congregation. Besides, most would lack the courage to follow us here.”

“They might force Garth. It is his debt of honor.”

“I suspect it was Garth who freed me from the penalty shed.” Devon shook his head. “And he is expert with his bow, yet the quarrel missed me.”

The end of the bounce tube rushed toward them and—Rachel tensed. “Don’t worry,” Devon said. They slowed gently and stopped, floating at the end of the corridor. The plate on the lockport flashed:

ACCESS TUBE
SERVICE MODULE

He showed her how to use the handholds.

“Now what?” said Rachel.

Devon touched the lockport panel. “We’ll find another skin-suit and I’ll introduce you to the sphere projector and I’ll show you—” He kissed her.

“What will you show me, Devon?”

He laughed joyously as the portal opened before them. “The universe.”

Night in Cypress Corners, wrapping silent wings around the house of Old Garth. Two men sat in the kitchen before the dead, banked fire. Young Garth broke the long silence.

“Was it you who helped Devon escape from the shed?”

The old man would not meet his eyes. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” said Garth. “I want to know.”

This time Old Garth raised his face toward his son. “Then yes. I used a bar to pry loose the screen.”

Garth nodded. “I will tell no one.” He paused. “Why?”

The old man smiled slightly. “Devon was your friend; I would not have you obligated to hurl stones at him. And you are my son.”

After a time, Garth took a heavy breath and said, “It will serve no good.” His father looked at him questioningly. “Elder Jubal has carefully explained things to me. Devon is an outlaw who must be returned to Cypress Corners for his punishment, or else slain when I find him. Rachel must be brought back to her family. These are the

things the Elders demand of me.”

The old man slowly shook his head. “Must you?” Already knowing the answer.

“Yes, I must,” said Garth, “and so I will.”

The night grew colder; neither man moved to build the fire. Owls hooted in the trees around the house.

Deep within the ship called the Ark, at the juncture of one of the Ark’s many thousands of bounce tubes and a lockport, a severed hand waited. It hung suspended within a small cloud of dead leaves, twigs, and other organic material. With five stiff fingers and blood clotted black around the stump of the wrist, the hand was a signpost.

Left behind unnoticed by the pursued, it remained, slowly turning, to welcome the pursuer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harlan Ellison is, of course, the incomparable Harlan Ellison, winner of more science fiction awards than, well, anyone else.

Edward Bryant is the multi-Nebula Award winning author of over a hundred short stories, over a thousand essays and reviews, and one novel with Harlan Ellison, PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES.

Ed's complete collected works are in the process of becoming available at: <http://ReAnimus.com/authors/edwardbryant>

ReAnimus Press



Breathing Life into Great Books

If you enjoyed this book we hope you'll tell others or write a review! We also invite you to [subscribe to our newsletter](#) to learn about our new releases and [join our affiliate program](#) (where you earn 12% of sales you recommend).

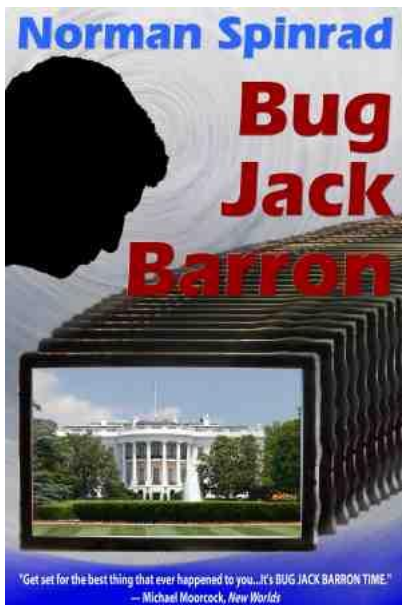
Here are more ebooks you'll enjoy from [ReAnimus Press](#) (plus lots more on the web site):



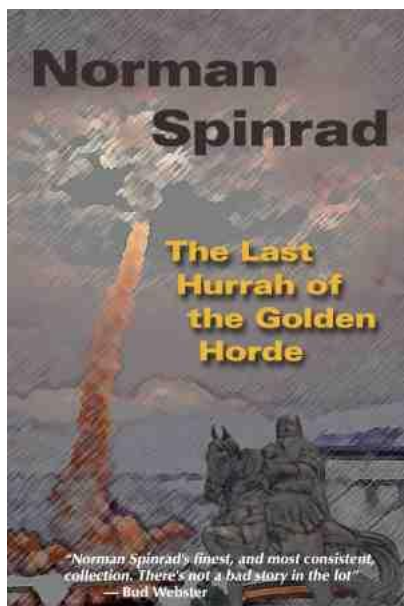
[The Exiles Trilogy](#), by Ben Bova [\[Amazon\]](#) [\[Author's Official Site\]](#)



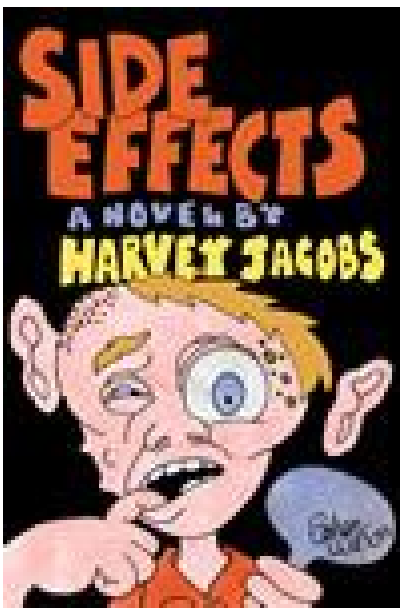
[The Star Conquerors \(Standard Edition\)](#), by Ben Bova [\[Amazon\]](#) [\[Author's Official Site\]](#)



[Bug Jack Barron, by Norman Spinrad](#)
[\[Amazon\]](#)
[\[Author's Official Site\]](#)



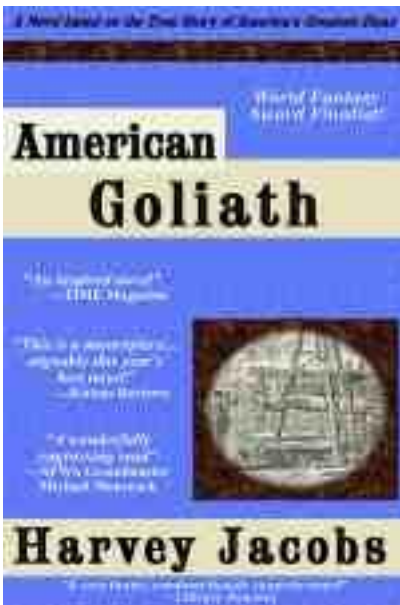
[The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde, by Norman Spinrad](#)
[\[Amazon\]](#)
[\[Author's Official Site\]](#)



Side Effects, by Harvey Jacobs

[\[Amazon\]](#)

[\[Author's Official Site\]](#)

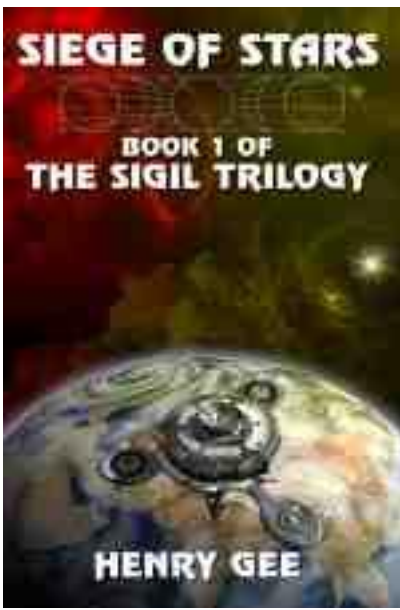


American Goliath, by Harvey Jacobs

[\[Amazon\]](#)

[\[Author's Official Site\]](#)

[\[Author's Official Site\]](#)



[The Sigil Trilogy, by Henry Gee](#) [Siege of Stars: Book One of](#)
[Official Site\]](#) [\[Amazon\]](#) [\[Author's](#)

Table of Contents

Unnamed	
Table of Contents	
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	
DEDICATION	
Unnamed	
INTRODUCTION	
THE STARLOST: UPDATE	
PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES	
PROLOGUE	
ONE	
TWO	
THREE	
FOUR	
FIVE	
SIX	
SEVEN	
EIGHT	
NINE	
TEN	
ELEVEN	
TWELVE	
THIRTEEN	
FOURTEEN	
FIFTEEN	
SIXTEEN	
SEVENTEEN	
EIGHTEEN	
NINETEEN	
TWENTY	
TWENTY-ONE	
TWENTY-TWO	
TWENTY-THREE	
TWENTY-FOUR	
TWENTY-FIVE	
TWENTY-SIX	
TWENTY-SEVEN	
TWENTY-EIGHT	
TWENTY-NINE	
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	